

**Bibliophile
Princess:
Volume 1**

Yui

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Bibliophile Princess

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When I heard an echo of familiar laughter, my foot nearly slipped from the ladder rung. Surprised, I looked down, peering out a window that had been left open for ventilation. I could see two shadows beneath the trees of the palace's inner garden. One belonged to someone I knew well—the heir to Sauslind Kingdom's throne, Prince Christopher. At the young age of twenty-one, he was both noble and wise, with a promising future ahead of him.

Normally His Highness took full advantage of his rank and appearance, charming ladies of all ages, while bringing cunning nobles to heel with his keen discernment. He was well-known for his youthful, kingly disposition. It was this man, always guarded, always dignified, whose carefree—*defenseless*—laughter now filled the air.

As someone who'd been by his side for four years now and (pardon me for being presumptuous enough to say as much) knew his character well, I was flummoxed at what I saw.

He was a prince, but he was also human. There were times when he acted his age, laughing and cracking jokes. That side of him was usually reserved for the closest of his inner circle, however.

Inner garden or not, it was still located within a palace rife with schemes and political maneuvering. You never knew who might be watching. My heart ached with a sharp, heavy pain seeing him so defenseless.

Then I let out a quiet sigh.

The time had finally come.



My name is Elianna Bernstein, the daughter of a noble family graced with the marquess rank in the Sauslind Kingdom. But my titles don't stop there, for I have another attached to my name that other noble ladies do not. I'm the fiancée of Sauslind's Crown Prince, Prince Christopher.

Four years ago, at the age of fourteen, I left the remote countryside to step into the radiant capital and make my debut into high society. It was then, overwhelmed by the dazzling noble ladies and their daughters, that I was summoned (for some reason) to stand beside Prince Christopher as his betrothed.

While the Bernstein family did hold the rank of marquess, our political weight put us below the bottom rungs of the earl families. If you're wondering why the crown prince would select the daughter of such a family as his bride-to-be, well...unfortunately, it wasn't for the kind of heart-pounding romance that might excite the ladies of the world. Nor was it my blinding beauty or anything so fanciful that might appear in the dreams of a starry-eyed maiden.

No, I had faded blonde hair with slight curls and similarly dull gray eyes. My features were praised as adorable by my family but earned me disgraceful nicknames from others. I was simply a plain Jane, nothing particularly desirable about me. Prince Christopher was my complete opposite, with hair that shone like sunlight, eyes like a cloudless blue sky, prominent, stunning facial features, and a presence that lit up whatever room he entered.

So why was someone like me chosen for a position—so coveted by other marriageable noble ladies—as the crown prince's fiancée? Well, simply because it was convenient. Our house wasn't aligned with any of the political factions of the court, nor did we count any troublesome people of influence among our relatives. Plus, my father and brother didn't have any interest in power (though in a way, that might disqualify them as nobles of the court). Since I didn't hold affections for any particular individual either, I was selected as a way of reestablishing balance in a court whose political factions were vying for supremacy.

When we first met each other, Prince Christopher had glistened brilliantly as he said, "Lady Elianna, you need only stay by my side and read your books."

My family was famous for producing a long line of book-lovers. One of our ancestors had opened a regional library in our territory and made it widely available for public access. The vast, colorful assortment of rare tomes that it contained, collected by generations of

marquesses, was said to rival that of the royal library's selection. The Bernstein family was full of eccentrics that would take a good book over having three meals a day.

I was no exception. I'd been buried in books ever since I learned to read. Where other ladies preferred dresses and jewels, I liked novel books. This had earned me a nickname that any normal girl might lament as shameful—not the more endearing alternative, “bookworm,” but rather, “Bibliophile Princess.”

Bibliophile Princess I may be, but even *I* knew the prince's proposal was bizarre. For a moment I misunderstood and got the absurd idea he was selecting me to read books aloud to him. When I tilted my head in confusion, the prince went on to cite the advantages for the Bernstein family in the impending factional conflict and power struggle, presenting his demands as a business deal.

“To be perfectly frank,” he said, “if I don't decide on a bride quickly, my mother and others around me will become insufferable.” Then he went on, “So what will it be, Lady Elianna? Now that you have made your societal debut and are of marriageable age, you won't be able to avoid your obligations as a noble. You could settle with some other noble's son, be forced to oversee his household affairs, all the while being dragged into the noble ladies' social gatherings. However, wouldn't you prefer to stay by my side and live life just reading books?”

“...Haah.”

I could more easily imagine the mental exhaustion I'd face as the betrothed of the crown prince before me than I could the hardships of being a future nobleman's wife. Just to be clear, I realize that reaction might come off as rude toward our country's handsome heir-to-be, but those of the Bernstein family were equally dispassionate toward anything that wasn't a book. By that standard, it was a rather normal response from me.

Prince Christopher offered a charming smile. “If you become my fiancée, you'll be able to turn down those engagement parties and dance parties, increasing your available reading time.” Then he amended, “Of course, you will still have to attend public events and events hosted by the royal family.”

Regardless of my opinion, there was no way a puny house such as mine could reject a request from the crown. Even someone as ignorant of the world such as I knew that his proposal was unprecedented. Basically, he was offering me, a simple noble lady, a loveless transaction.

“...I appreciate the kind offer. I was concerned for the hardships that would eventually befall me and felt melancholy over the loss of reading time I would face.”

The prince grinned, his next words like the seductive whisperings of the devil. “Besides, once you have the title of my betrothed to add to your name, you will be free to enter the royal archives, where you’ll be able to peruse and borrow to your heart’s content.”

Printed words flowed through the veins of the Bernstein family. As the daughter of said house, there was no way I wouldn’t jump at such a tempting prospect.

The royal archive, as its name implied, differed from the royal library. Access was limited to only those within the royal palace, and it held the crown’s personal, prized collection. A holy land for any book-lover.

That was the reason my father and brother—who’d sooner lock themselves away in our territory and live comfortably as custodians of the regional library, immersed in books—reluctantly worked inside the royal palace. I’d always listened eagerly as they told me about the crown’s collection of rare tomes. Now I would be able to see them for myself, touch them myself, and have access to an unexplored world. There was no greater bliss than that for a book-lover.

Prince Christopher offered a dazzling smile of his own when he saw my face beaming with joy, eyes alight. “Then our engagement is decided. I’ll be free from the nuisance of searching for a bride, and you’ll be free from your shackles as a noble lady. And in exchange for burdening you with the duty of being my betrothed, I’ll make absolutely sure your free time remains uninterrupted.”

For the first time, my heart pounded the same way it did when I touched a brand new book.

The prince was true to his word. After our engagement was announced, he ensured I could read my books freely, unburdened by my new position. I was skeptical from the outset, particularly in the beginning when the queen and her entourage incessantly invited me to their tea parties, the court ladies hounded me with their questions, and the high-ranking nobles yanked me this way and that with their expectations. Fortunately, the prince and his associates quickly (and cleverly) put an end to all that.

I’d spent the ensuing four years free from incident as the prince’s betrothed in name only, never really appearing in front of others. But now his true intentions were beginning to become clear to me. It matched the whispers going around as of late as well. Whispers that said the Bibliophile Princess was indeed a fake fiancée, and that the reason the prince still hadn’t gone through with an official marriage despite my coming of age was because, now that the political power struggle had calmed, he could finally welcome his true love to court—the real princess he’d longed for.

Rumors couldn't be accepted at face value, but I also knew the reality which served as definitive proof. In Sauslind Kingdom, men and women were considered adults when they reached the age of eighteen. Provided their partner was an adult and it didn't offend society's sensibilities, a woman could be wed while she was still underage. But the prince had been non-committal, extending our engagement on the basis that I was still "too young." There were no talks about an official wedding, not even now that I'd reached adulthood. That only reinforced the credibility of the rumors.

There was nothing to be done about it. Ultimately, what the prince and I had agreed upon was a mutually beneficial engagement. A girl who hadn't even undertaken princess training couldn't be made a princess. There existed no romantic feelings between us, just a shared struggle against societal pressures placed on men and women of our positions. And now I could see it as clearly as if I'd read it in a story—the day the prince would annul our engagement had come.

The girl accompanying His Highness was the daughter of a viscount, and she had just recently entered the inner palace for etiquette lessons. Noble ladies entered the palace for such lessons for a variety of reasons. Some as part of bridal training before their wedding, some for added prestige before a marriage proposal, and some as a part of job hunting. Although they were the daughters of noblemen, there were a number of houses in such circumstances where a lady would have to seek employment. From what I heard, positions associated with the palace, such as maid or court lady, were particularly well sought after. There was honor in serving those of higher rank, as well as the opportunity to acquaint oneself with promising lords working at the palace. And for some, the chance to fall in love with a prince, just like in a romance novel.

The name of this viscount's daughter was Lady Irene Palcas. Talk about her had grown recently, and I'd encountered her myself a number of times. The first time I spotted her was in the royal archives. Though it really all began when I overheard the staff members in the archive talking about her. "There's this really adorable lady who just recently began etiquette lessons here," they said.

The lady to whom they referred had soft chestnut-colored hair, bright brown eyes that would captivate anyone who looked into them, and a soprano voice that filled the air wherever she went. One so sweet you'd never tire of hearing it. She was warm, sociable, and overflowing with charisma. She seemed to be my exact opposite, a true lady. I began to remember her face after seeing her stop by the archives a number of times on errands.

Our first real encounter happened when I discovered one of the archive's ladders had been damaged and was searching for a person to

whom I could report the problem. I heard the echo of voices coming from the break room and peeked my head in. Inside, the smell of tea leaves hung thick as heavy perfume. I spotted a tea set in disarray, a panicked Irene standing beside it.

“Oh, I was so careless... Forgive me, Prince Theodore,” she said.

“No, it’s nothing, really,” answered Prince Theodore, the curator of the archives. Although he was the younger brother of the king, the age gap between Prince Theodore and His Majesty was so great it seemed more appropriate to think of him as Prince Christopher’s older brother instead. He was still single, despite his royal status—a popular, charming man in the prime of his life with stunning dark golden brown hair and ultramarine eyes.

“More importantly,” he continued, “you weren’t injured, were you, Lady Irene?”

“No, I’m not, but...whatever shall we do about this? I’m afraid I’ve soiled someone’s book. This title is popular among the women of the working class district, no? Is there really someone within the royal palace who would favor such literature?” Her voice was thick with genuine skepticism.

The book in question, now covered in tea leaves, was popular with the masses. Penned by a housewife in a fishing village, it provided an interesting—and sometimes emotionally heartrending—account of her daily life.

I peeked my head in the door, feeling awkward, and spoke up. “Um... That’s my book.”

Members of the Bernstein family didn’t value printed works based on the rank of those who wrote them, but the same couldn’t be said for the rest of the nobility. I felt ashamed hearing the disbelief in her voice, as if she couldn’t imagine this could be the favorite book of the prince’s bride-to-be.

“Oh goodness,” she murmured, cutely pressing her hand over her mouth. Then hastily she added, “Please forgive me, Lady Elianna! I was careless and soiled your book! I am truly, truly sorry!”

Did she think I was angry because she’d spilled tea leaves on my book?

Before I could dispel the misconception, Prince Theodore cut in with a sigh. “Lady Elianna’s negligence is to blame here. She knows not to leave her personal belongings unattended. You needn’t apologize so profusely.” He first comforted the cowering Lady Irene and then said to me, “Leave the book with me. I will clean up this mess. Hurry and be on your way, Lady Elianna. And do be more careful next time.”

His curt tone left little room for discussion. It was all I could do to inform him of the damaged ladder before leaving the archives behind.

After that incident, I often spotted Lady Irene trying to foster good relations with Prince Theodore. I'd also noticed her, just two weeks prior, engaging in friendly smalltalk with Glen Eisenach, a red-haired knight who was part of the Imperial Guard and also the prince's bodyguard. Not an especially strange sight to see; Lord Glen was a bright, charming individual, popular among both men and women.

But when I next saw her together with Alexei Strasser—son of a duke and the prince's right-hand man, referred to in whispers as the "Ice Scion"—I was a bit surprised. Lord Alexei, as his nickname might imply, had black hair with icy blue eyes and an astute aura about him. He was equally indifferent to everyone regardless of rank, whether it be a beautiful noblewoman or nobleman of greater status. Thus it was rare for me to see anyone able to engage with him so openly.

I also heard hushed whispers that she was personally close to the court's master musician, Alan Ferrera, a popular Adonis type with honey-colored hair. At the time, I didn't think much about it; her reputation among other ladies seemed a bit dreadful, but being acquainted with such a cast of popular young men would be enough to draw both ire and envy. But from an outsider's perspective, His Highness and Lady Irene gave off an air of intimacy, and the way she looked at him with such single-minded devotion made the unspoken clear. She had feelings for the prince.

So that's it, I thought, only now realizing. It may be rude to say as much, but a certain proverb came to mind. "To shoot the general, you must first begin with his horse." My noble birth aside, as someone who loved books and often holed myself up in my room to read them, her exceptional networking skills seemed praiseworthy. As the prince's betrothed, I should be the one displaying such prowess.

Did Lady Irene lay the groundwork to approach His Highness, or were the men around him showing such consideration for her because she'd drawn his interest? I couldn't be sure. I was, however, certain about one thing: the relationship between these two hadn't started recently. The way he laughed so joyously and smiled at her told me that much.

"Lady Elianna?"

Someone's voice abruptly cut in, dragging me back to my senses. At some point I had dismounted from the ladder and the voices in the rear garden had disappeared. I suddenly realized I'd been a daze this whole time.

"Is something wrong? Did something happen?" The deep rumbling voice inquiring after my wellbeing belonged to Prince Theodore, the royal archive's curator. He wasn't much for words under ordinary circumstances, but since I began visiting the archives frequently, we'd grown close enough to speak openly.

Before I could bring my panicked brain under control, he spotted the book in my arms and the ladder behind me, and knitted his brows. "I believe I told you just the other day to call someone to assist if you wanted a book off the higher shelves."

He was right. It certainly wasn't becoming of a noblewoman to clamber up and down a ladder herself. I muttered an apology.

Prince Theodore breathed a sigh. He was already busy enough lately as it was, and now I'd become the target of his exasperation. "I wasn't informed you would be visiting the palace today. What happened to your bodyguards? This may be the palace, but you mustn't go around unattended."

"Yes, my apologies."

I felt like an unruly student being scolded by their teacher. Up until this point, he'd been one of the few who showed understanding toward my unladylike behavior, but perhaps his patience had worn thin.

"Does Chris know that you're here at the palace?" he asked.

"...No."

I hadn't been to the palace in five days. My aunt injured her hip, and I'd been looking after her, at least in theory. In truth, she was just borrowing me as a conversation partner so she could kill time. This had drawn me away from the book I wanted to read, and instead I'd been forced to endure the drudgery that was reading love stories and poetry collections that my aunt had recommended aloud and at length. Today I finally slipped away from that slog and made my way here to the archives to retrieve my longed-for tome, only to witness the aforementioned scene.

Prince Theodore sighed once more. "Then go home quickly," he said curtly, chasing me out of the archives.

My chest prickled with pain. Prince Theodore was the only one outside my family with whom I could discuss books. I had hoped when we met today that I could ask about the book he was holding.

I trudged down the corridor.

Access to the archives had been increasingly restrictive this past month. I had been given free access to visit as the prince's betrothed, but even the workers there that I used to converse with now acted distant and shooed me from the books. I suspected they were handling older tomes, since they were all wearing gloves, and volunteered to help, but they turned me down flat. They acted almost as if I couldn't be trusted with handling the books there, and that saddened me greatly.

I understood now though, after seeing the prince and Lady Irene. The workers probably sensed that he had someone special in mind now and were trying to put distance between themselves and me,

knowing our engagement would be annulled. The same could be said about the events in the rose garden ten days ago, come to think of it.

One of our regular tea parties was planned that day in the rose garden. I was late in arriving, held back by the chief herbalist who'd come to return a book. At the behest of the male servant attending me, we hurried to the garden. Clamor from that direction came to greet us as we approached, in the form of Lady Irene and a number of maids.

"If it isn't Lady Elianna!"

I flinched at her reproachful tone and strong gaze.

"And just where were you? Everyone was waiting for you," she huffed.

No matter the reason, I was the one at fault for being late.

"My apologies," I said. "I was delayed by another engagement. Did something happen?"

There were damp splotches peppered across her hair and clothes, but I needed only glance out the corridor to see it was sunny outside.

Lady Irene flinched and dropped her intense gaze, shivering as if she only now remembered the cold of her wet clothes. "That was disrespectful for someone of my rank to say. And disgraceful for me to show myself in front of you like this. Please, have mercy on me!"

Excuse me? I tilted my head in confusion. She'd only spoken the truth. I saw no reason for her to abase herself on my account. More importantly, if she didn't change out of those clothes quickly, she'd catch cold. Before I could mention as much, a sharp voice cut through the air.

"Lady Elianna!"

I glanced to discover a red-haired knight, Lord Glen, the alarm clear on his face as he dashed over. He was even more drenched than Lady Irene and her maids. He studied me closely, eyes traveling up and down my body as if something had happened to me, but it wasn't until he spotted my manservant nearby that he finally let out a sigh of relief. "So that's it..." he muttered bitterly to himself.

I shrank under his withering gaze. He must be disappointed in me for having the gall to keep everyone waiting on my account, must think it unbefitting of Prince Christopher's fiancée.

"Lord Glen," Lady Irene began, in a voice much softer than she had used with me, as if to calm him, "you must change out of that quickly. No matter how capable of a knight you may be, you will still catch a cold if you stay in that."

Her soothing tone earned a sigh from him. "You needn't worry about me, my lady. You're also soaked yourself. I'd like to talk to you about what transpired. Allow me to see you to your room." Lord Glen

called a nearby guard and gave him strict instructions to escort me home. His gaze was more intense than I'd ever seen it before as he informed me, "The tea party has been canceled. The palace is in an uproar right now, so His Highness has his hands full. Please return to your residence for today."

"But..." I started to protest. I wanted him to at least hear the reason for my delay. Besides, it would reflect poorly on the prince if I didn't deliver my apologies to the guests. But there was a rare unsettling aura about Lord Glen that gave no room for dissent, so the words hung unspoken.

Lord Glen and Lady Irene began chatting amongst themselves as they left, and the guard who delivered me back home informed me there had been a plumbing failure in the rose garden. It wasn't until I arrived back at our estate that I realized it had always been Lord Glen who had escorted me up until now. That day marked the beginning of me noticing the absence of things I'd grown accustomed to.

It all made sense, reflecting back on things now—from the way Prince Theodore had acted so formal and curt, putting distance between us, to the way Lord Glen went from smiling welcomingly at me to politely drawing a line between us.

Four years had passed since Prince Christopher named me his betrothed. I had interacted with all of the people close to him. Lord Glen, the red-headed knight, always acted warm and welcoming (unlike you might expect for someone in the palace), always willing to help me carry my books. Alexei, the Ice Scion, firmly believed in using any tools at his disposal (including his own parents) and often had me doing errands for him, such as delivering messages or sorting documents, when I wasn't actively invested in a book of my own.

There was a time when the four (or even five) of us, including His Highness, would banter and crack jokes together, and for the first time I had found something outside of books fun and enjoyable. It wouldn't be long now before Lady Irene would be taking my place, I was sure. No, perhaps it was too late and I'd lost my place with them already. After all, the prince had let his mask down in front of her.

"...Oh dear."

My feet stopped halfway down the corridor, one hand pressed tight against my chest. It felt as if a gaping hole had opened there. Even as dull-headed as I was, I realized then that I was in shock. The sight of the prince laughing was seared into the back of my eyelids and wouldn't go away, alongside the image of him and Lady Irene looking so intimate, drawn together beneath the trees.

I'd had a vague inkling that this day might come, but now that it was actually upon me, it was worse than I had imagined, with all the

impact of a cannonball. In these past four years, I'd grown greatly attached to all of them and the time we'd shared.

I was a fiancée in name only, a temporary placeholder to be removed when the prince found someone he truly loved. That's all I was. All I was supposed to be.

It was strange. My heart twisted so tight it brought me to tears. *Me*, the Bibliophile Princess. A sense of loss ate at me from the inside, one I hadn't experienced since my mother passed away when I was six. I softly stroked the book in my other hand. Books had always consoled me in times like these. This one in particular I had received just six days ago from Prince Christopher. It had been a bright afternoon...

Ever since the incident in the rose garden, the prince and Lord Glen had a tense aura about them. I, myself, felt unpleasant about the situation. I was reading a book as I always did when the prince called out to me, carrying a gentle aura about him.

"I have a gift," he said.

I tilted my head ever so slightly. The prince didn't often bring me gifts anymore. I always shuddered whenever we had a dance party or outing and he presented lavish gifts of clothing or accessories (all for the purpose of keeping up appearances as the crown prince's betrothed).

How many books could you buy for the same price as this piece of jewelry?

The question never left my lips, but the prince must not have seen fit to empty the treasury on account of his false fiancée, for shortly thereafter he ceased presenting me with such extravagant pieces. Thus it was rare for him to present any gifts, and my heart fluttered from the novelty.

Prince Christopher beamed as he always did, holding out an unwrapped tome. "*A Record of the Downfall of the Kai Arg Empire - Astrologian's Edition*. You wanted a book on the old empire that wasn't written by a historian, yes? There aren't very many copies in circulation out there so it was a bit of a hard find, but...I finally found it and wanted to hand it to you as soon as I could. I thought you'd enjoy it." He spoke with a gentle smile on his face, his eyes monitoring my reaction in earnest.

I was immediately at a loss for words, trembling with emotion. The book he'd obtained on my behalf was an extremely difficult one to find, even with my family's connections, and I'd nearly given up on it. Now as I saw it before me, I was overcome with shock and emotion. More than anything, I was delighted that the prince would use his time and resources to go to the trouble of hunting it down for

me.

The feel of the foreign letters embossed on the cover as my hand ghosted over it made my heart flutter once again. “Thank you, Prince Christopher.” I wasn’t sure how better to convey my joy beyond those words. It was all I could do to gaze back at him, eyes trembling with emotion.

“Good,” he grinned happily, as if relieved to see I was pleased.

Recalling the happiness I felt back then helped soothe the emptiness I felt now. Even if the prince had someone he truly loved, someone he could be completely authentic with, and even if our engagement was annulled, Prince Christopher was not the type to treat me cruelly. Instead of waiting for the end to come, I summoned what little courage I had and decided to ask him myself.

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While I spent most of my time in the royal archives, the prince’s office was a close second. Entering such a place when I was merely his betrothed could present a number of problems, so I’d initially rejected his invitation, but then the prince had said, “This is the best place for you to be able to read completely uninterrupted.” And when I took him up on that offer, I discovered he was right. The room was cut off from the noise of the outside world. It really made me feel like he was honoring his initial promise.

When I made a request of the chamberlain (with whom I was well-acquainted) to let me see His Highness, the man was terribly flustered. Was the prince receiving an important guest? I realized what was going on only after the door to the neighboring conference room popped open and a serving maid stepped out. A charming voice spilled out with her.

“I never realized you were so interested in handiwork, Prince Christopher.”

“That’s only because the way you talk about it is so intriguing, Lady Irene.”

“Dear me,” she giggled delightedly.

Their words pierced me through the heart, though I wasn’t sure at first whether to attribute the blame for that to the prince or Lady Irene. But Prince Christopher’s words followed soon enough, as if pouring salt on an already opened wound.

“Even if I were to present a crafted work to you as a gift, I’m sure it wouldn’t compare to the quality of your house’s craftsman.”

“So you’re saying you would give me a gift?” Her voice, overflowing with joy, was like a killing blow that echoed in my ears.

So that’s how it is. Somewhere inside, the calmer part of me

understood. I had accepted the prince's gift, thinking it special, but it hadn't meant anything to him. Suddenly the rare tome in my arms lost its luster and became meaningless. I felt like I might crumple to my knees. I let out a small, shaky breath, waved off the flustered maid, and slipped into the room.

Prince Christopher jumped to his feet, unable to keep his composure. "Eli...?!"

Inwardly, I felt confused that he would call me by that nickname now, a nickname used only by my family and those closest to me, but more importantly, I had to pay my respects as a lady and apologize for my unauthorized intrusion.

"No, that's fine," he said, "but...weren't you supposed to be visiting your aunt today?"

I felt my gaze suddenly grow cold, which was something unusual for me. His words seemed to be a direct confession that he'd aimed for a time when I wouldn't be in the palace so he could gallivant with another woman. Or at least that was the ill-natured interpretation that flashed through my mind.

At the same time, I could feel the muscles in my face, which normally never moved, slip smoothly into a smile. "There are no words to properly convey my gratitude at your concern over my aunt's illness, Your Highness. In truth, I had a small affair to attend to here today, but I apologize for interrupting what appears to be a delightful discussion."

"Uh, and what affair is that?" He was being unusually timid.

The room was full of its usual occupants: Glen, who for some reason had a hand pressed over his face, and Alexei, who had a hand to his forehead as if he were battling a migraine. Lady Irene, the only woman in the room, looked shocked, but the moment she recognized me, she had that same look of terror she'd worn before.

My eyes didn't hover on any of those three. There was only one person I focused my gaze on, and that was Prince Christopher. I mimicked him, grinning wide as he always did, giving the biggest smile I could muster. "About this book that you gifted to me the other day...I'll be returning it to you."



“Huh...” The prince froze solid, looking unusually comical.

I watched him as I declared, “I don’t need it anymore.” After one last glance, I left the book on the table, bowed, and saw myself out. No one called out to stop me.

I was pretty spaced out after arriving back home. My father and brother visited when they returned, but my mood remained dour and I refused dinner, holing up in my room. I, the Bibliophile Princess, didn’t feel like reading any books.

Enough, it’s about time you admit it, I thought, sighing to myself as I sat alone in my darkened room. Why was it such a surprise, such a shock for me to see Prince Christopher reveal his true self in front of another woman? Why was I in such despair—to the point of tears, to the point of falling to my knees—at realizing that his present hadn’t been anything special? Why was it that my chest felt so tight, so unbelievably painful? Why was it that with each breath, my heart seemed to ache?

“...That must be it.”

It was because I loved Prince Christopher.

I had no idea when these feelings had started. But it was in the way the sun shone off his golden hair, the way his eyes looked like the sky on a cloudless day, the way his voice sounded so dignified as he dispensed orders, the way he held himself so proudly as royalty. And how, sometimes, there was an iciness about him when he demonstrated his strict decisiveness. My chest panged with the memories.

For the first time I understood what a foolish person I’d been. I put on a clever farce, feigned indifference in the face of a possible annulment, but in truth, I wasn’t even aware of my own feelings. I was just a big-headed Bibliophile Princess. No matter how many books I read or how much I studied the knowledge of our predecessors, none of it had proved useful in this situation. I’d realized my feelings too late. My own heart didn’t even work the way I wanted.

A laugh slipped out of me, mocking my own misery.

I had no idea what to do from now on. My books offered me no answers. The only thing I did understand was that the person the prince would now invite on sunny days to read to him beneath the shade of the trees, and on rainy days to enjoy tea time alone with, wouldn’t be me.

I watched vacantly as the night wore on, unable to summon the will to do anything.

Act 2: One-Woman Show

Two days flew by since I saw the prince with Lady Irene. I sat at breakfast, a single letter in hand, and informed my father and brother of my plans for the day.

“From Prince Theodore?”

I nodded in response to my brother’s question. “I still have a dictionary I took from the archives, so I’ll go return it today.”

Just four days prior, I went to the archives to borrow said dictionary, unable to finish my book without it. I’d returned the book but accidentally took the dictionary home with me.

I wracked my brain trying to think if there were any other tomes I’d yet to return. There was also the room they’d provided for me when I was welcomed into the palace. It would be agonizing work, but I should pack my things there quickly.

While my brother was lost in thought, my father called over to me. “Oh, Eli. There’s something I’d like your input on.”

“Yes?”

My father, a man in his mid-forties with white strands peppered amongst his light brown hair, was an easygoing, carefree type of person. It was rare for him to seek my counsel for anything. Formerly he worked under Prince Theodore as an archive official (though it was really a job in name only), but since I became Prince Christopher’s betrothed, the post no longer suited our elevated status, and Father was selected to work as a cabinet minister in the Ministry of Finance. My brother’s situation was similar, his days kept busy as the prime minister’s aide. Once again I felt guilty for the responsibilities I’d forced upon my family.

“We received a letter from your grandfather not long ago, if you’ll remember. You haven’t been back in so long. What do you say? Fred and I will take a holiday, and the three of us can go back together.”

“Father,” my older brother Alfred cut in, his tone strict and reprimanding.

I tilted my head and considered the suggestion. It didn’t seem like a bad idea. My grandfather had given up his title to my father and secluded himself in our territory. And true enough, we’d received a letter from him urging my return around my eighteenth birthday.

Since the annulment of my engagement with His Highness was just a matter of time, it would be uncomfortable for me to stay here in the capital. Besides, I’d feel better if I didn’t have to see his new bride-to-be in person. Some might accuse me of just running away, but these bottled-up feelings needed somewhere to go.

“But can you both really take a holiday?” I interjected as the two engaged in some kind of verbal dispute.

There wasn’t a single instance since I’d been welcomed into the palace where the three of us had been able to return home together.

When I'd peeked in at their work desks before, they'd both been covered in an artistically arranged mountain range of paperwork. One that threatened to collapse at any moment. It wasn't hard to imagine that their current workload far surpassed what it had been when they worked in the archives. They had my respect for doing jobs completely unrelated to their previous field without gripe or complaint.

Father replied nonchalantly, "Don't worry! In fact, I've already applied. Holidays are important. The number of hours a person has (to read books) is limited."

Hm, something about that was suspicious, as if there was an underlying motive hidden in his words. The way he was beaming made his thoughts transparent; he was imagining himself surrounded by his beloved books, merrily passing his time.

Alfred sighed, exasperated.

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I accompanied my father and brother to the palace, where I was left agape at the rows of pillars that made up the government offices. Normally I came here at the blessing of His Highness, using a passage that was exclusive to royalty, so I only met a limited number of people. Naturally, not many here knew who I was.

Our coach pulled up where a crowd of people were waiting, and as soon as it came to a stop, they immediately began talking to my father and brother, whisking the two off to their respective offices. By the looks of it, they were quite busy. If that was anything to go by, I wondered if they really could get permission for a holiday or not.

"...Prince Christopher did?"

My heart jumped out of my chest, unprepared for the name that came flying out from a nearby conversation. A door was left ajar, and amidst the hubbub of shuffling papers and bustling bodies filtered out the sound of a conversation.

"Nah, there's no way, not possible."

"No, I'm telling you! One of His Highness's messengers was at Earl Casull's house, they say. And you know Lady Irene's family is a branch family to the Casull's."

"Seriously? So the prince is really serious about breaking off his engagement to the Bernstein's Fairy Princess and switching over to Lady Irene instead?"

"Huh? Sir, that sounds like a load of crock. I heard those are just rumors Viscount Palcas's people have been spreading."

"Nah, I've seen it myself. It looked like the prince and Lady Irene were having a tryst."

"Wait, the maids were talking about it too. Saying stuff like, 'So

the prince is just like every other man.”

“There’s also been some strange rumors going around amongst the maids too. They were saying that the Fairy Princess is jealous of Lady Irene and has been doing horrible things to her and stuff.”

“Codswallop. I don’t buy that at all.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.”

The conversation trickled on, but I pressed past and left it behind me. Some of the words didn’t make much sense to me, but the conversation did reflect that those working in the palace were really invested in the prince’s relationship with Lady Irene, as well as myself.

I only associated with an extremely limited number of people within the palace and was unfamiliar with the gossip. Perhaps there were other people or places that knew about the prince and his relationship far before I’d ever heard about Lady Irene. It seemed I, completely lost in my books, was the only one that didn’t know. I brooded over the thought.

All I could think about was running from the problem, but at this rate even Prince Christopher’s reputation, which he’d gone to painstaking lengths to build, would be tainted. For the sake of Sauslind Kingdom’s future, this wasn’t a desirable state to be in. We would need to announce the annulment of our engagement soon if we were to break out of this current deadlock, but that wasn’t something a marquess family could request. Not unless the circumstances were extreme enough to warrant it.

As I anguished over who I might approach to consult about the issue, the door in front of me burst open.

“...Have we obtained the evidence?”

“The third patrol unit has the warehouse surrounded, but we have a report that a number of riverboats left in the early morning heading for Ulthar.”

The man’s cunning eyes turned chilly. He had an imposing air about him but maintained a polite facade. “Tell me, are the capital’s patrol units full of imbeciles? They kept watch over the warehouse on the Neville River, but didn’t keep a lookout for boats?”

“N-No! They’ve already deployed troops to the mouth of the river. Commander Glen said we’d round them all up in one go!”

“So it seems three days of no sleep or rest is enough to make even a stupid man come up with something intelligent.” The Ice Scion’s smooth features contorted in a grin so malicious he could be the devil’s henchman. Then his gaze wandered to the sacrificial lamb who’d missed her (my) opportunity to run.

“If it isn’t Lady Elianna. I’m glad to see you have so much free time. It’s thanks to you that the entire palace is drowning in work. While you’re headed to the archives, I’d like you to take this as well.

On the way, deliver this letter to the Royal Household Department and tell them to resubmit their reorganization proposal and personnel catalog for the past five years by this afternoon. And also be sure to tell them, ‘Absurd ideas won’t get you anywhere.’ Can you do that?” Lord Alexei was looking even more ghoulish than usual. A closer examination of his pale blue eyes revealed they were bloodshot, and even his pale skin looked a shade of exhausted I hadn’t seen before. Had something serious happened?

While I stood there blinking, Lord Alexei forced a number of miscellaneous chores on me. His subordinate looked at me pityingly, but apparently he wasn’t chivalrous enough to offer himself up in my stead. The only reason I’d come was to return this book and clear out my private quarters, but now things had taken a strange turn. No, perhaps it was more apt to say this was things operating as usual?

At last I reached a place I recognized (in the form of the grand staircase at the heart of the palace) and laboriously began my ascent. Then suddenly—

“Eeeeeek!”

I heard a cry from behind me and the sound of something tumbling. Shocked, I looked back to see a girl, who’d apparently fallen, at the base of the steps. Her soft chestnut-colored hair was splayed out over her body. What really drew my concern was how pitifully her arms and legs were spread out around her as she lay there face down.

Before I could rush down the stairs to inspect her, another cry echoed.

“Irene!” This time it was a man, one who raced to the fallen girl. “Irene! Irene, stay with me...!” The man, who so woefully screamed her name, had honey gold hair, feminine features, and a petite form that might cause some to mistake him for a boy. “Irene! Why did this have to happen to you...!”

Instead of mourning, I think you should call a doctor.

I moved my gaze, thinking to call for help, but the unusually loud voices had already drawn people to the scene. Some rushed forward to check the girl’s condition, voices calling for a doctor mixing in with the clamor. As this happened, Lady Irene slowly regained consciousness. The man with honey gold hair helped lift her up, and she clung to his arm, body trembling.

“Lady Elianna...Lady Elianna did this!” she said.

...Pardon?

Everyone at the bottom of the stairs (save for Lady Irene) turned their accusing gazes up at me.

I just stood there frozen, wide-eyed. Was this how a criminal felt when they got caught in the act? I was the heinous lady villain who’d

callously thrust a frail maiden down a flight of stairs. Should I also hold a folding fan in one hand and cackle? Or was it more appropriate for me to curse at her and say, "Know your place!"?

Oh dear, this wasn't the time to entertain such thoughts. Things had just taken such a dramatic, theatrical turn that my mind started to wander. I found myself comparing this scene to one from a romance novel I'd read at length for my aunt just days ago. Maybe the story had been a bad influence on me.

"Irene...you can't really mean to say that Lady Elianna did this to you?"

"I...I..." As Lady Irene trembled pitifully, flapping her mouth, a new lead character took to the stage. (Or perhaps it would be more appropriate to call him the hero?)

"What is all of this uproar?" Enter Prince Christopher, who still retained his splendor even as he looked unusually irritable.

It was the heroine (or so everyone regarded her as such) who then called his name. "Prince Chris...!" While Lady Irene beamed with joy as tears beaded in her eyes, my heart froze over.

Was I expected to stick to the script (for this seemingly pre-prepared comedy skit) and fulfill my role? Did this fall within the contractual obligations of my agreement with His Highness?

The prince coolly surveyed the scene before kneeling down at Lady Irene's side. As he looked her over to ensure she wasn't injured, Lady Irene played up her role as the heroine of a tragedy, clinging to him as she cried. Then, in response to the dignified way he'd posed the question, she timidly plucked up her courage and said, "I-I tried to...I tried to tell Lady Elianna that it was just a misunderstanding about Your Highness and me. B-But she...she said it was all my fault. Then she suddenly shoved me down the stairs...!"

The scene must have been heartrending to those watching, what with the way Lady Irene clapped her hands over her face woefully.

The prince was sympathetic, kindly consoling her. "What do you mean by 'misunderstanding'? Did Elianna do something else to you besides this?"

"Y-Yes, she did. I just haven't been able to say anything this whole time."

"You don't have anything to fear anymore," he assured. "Will you give us your testimony so we can get all these crimes out in the open?"

Their gazes met, tears still falling from Lady Irene's eyes. Even the wet streak left behind on her cheek looked like something out of a painting.

Something was off, but what was it exactly?

I felt a chill go down my spine. I'd seen the prince like this once

before. Hidden perfectly behind that devil's gleaming smile was a carnivore creeping up to slaughter its prey.

Lady Irene passionately pleaded her case. According to her, she'd spent her days in misery ever since she'd arrived at the palace for etiquette lessons. She was ridiculed for being a minor noble, treated like a maid servant, denied her meals, and at the worst of it, she'd been chased off to sleep in the stables where she'd nearly escaped a low-ranking soldier's violent assault. All of this was at the behest of Elianna, the daughter of a marquess and future ruler of the inner palace.

"A-And then..." She went on to explain how it grew worse after she became acquainted with Lord Glen, Lord Alexei and Prince Christopher. "Just the other day when I went to retrieve a rose from the garden for her, I got soaked because they were watering that day, and she laughed at me. Then when I went to return one of the books as she'd requested, the ladder I tried to use in the archives had been damaged, and Prince Theodore saved me from a dangerous fall. After that, I received a box of sweets from Lady Elianna, and it was filled with...with bugs...!"

Oh my. I'd been quite the little busy bee lately it seemed. Leaving the first half of those accusations aside, the latter did sound vaguely familiar. While I pondered the matter to myself, the prince responded sympathetically to Lady Irene's laundry list of my (alleged) crimes.

"That must have been so difficult for you, Irene." He gave a soft nod as he comforted her. "So you were at such a loss that you confronted Elianna directly?"

"Y-Yes. But I never dreamed she would push me down the stairs...!"

"Oh yes, you claim Eli pushed you, correct?"

"Yes! I'm absolutely sure she—" At last she turned from the prince, aiming her accusatory gaze up at me, only for her eyes to go wide and her voice to trail off.

...Terribly sorry, it seems I've ruined this grand, once-in-a-lifetime play of yours. I suppose I should also apologize for looking completely unladylike as well. For those of you in the audience, please do understand not all noblewomen have the kind of arm strength that I do.

Miraculously balanced in both arms were five thick tomes, each the width of an adult's thumb finger; two long, rolled maps in either hand; and a stack of documents and written correspondence heaped on top. For someone of my small stature, it was a virtual tower, high enough to cover the lower half of my face. Library organization had left my arms toned enough that they didn't tremble under such weight, but it would take a feat of God to be able to push someone down a flight of stairs without disrupting my own balance. And sadly,

I was no acrobat's apprentice (at least as far as I knew).

Prince Christopher gave a small, familiar sigh.

I flinched a bit when I heard it. It was the same woeful sigh my aunt and other family members gave me when they said, "Please don't show off that arm strength of yours, it's unbecoming for a lady of such a delicate appearance." Still, books required proper muscle. At times you needed enough to be able to carry multiple volumes while mounting a ladder.

The prince stood and strode forward, not even looking back as Lady Irene called out entreatingly, "U-Um, Prince Chris..." His footsteps as he started up the stairs were imposing enough to keep the room silent. When he arrived where I stood, he took the maps and half of the books I was holding. I didn't even have the chance to refuse him.

Being a man, his build was such that he could easily tuck the load under one arm, and yet for some reason he sullenly grumbled under his breath. "Alex...that dolt. After I told him numerous times to have some moderation."

"Prince Chris...! Please believe me. It really was Lady Elianna who pushed me. And all the other incidents of harassment up until now as well...! I beg of you, make a fair and just decision on this, Your Highness!" Lady Irene now appealed to the prince with tears in her eyes. While she was still drunk off her role as the heroine, she at least had the decency to realize how shameful the situation had become for her.

The prince quietly turned his attention to her pleas. "Indeed. Then first, is there anyone who actually witnessed what took place?"

"Alan did!" Lady Irene whipped around to look at the man, as if he were her last lifeline.

The young man with honey-colored hair smiled innocently back. "Yes, I witnessed Lady Irene Palcas falling from the steps."

"And what of the claim that Elianna pushed her?"

"Hmm. Yeah, I think it's pretty clear to everyone that it would've been impossible for her to push Lady Irene. Not with how many books she had in her hands. Even I don't have the level of acrobatics required to play an instrument and push someone at the same time."

Lady Irene's face burned bright red as she scowled at him. "Alan, you...!"

He returned the hostility with a soft smile. "Even if I testified on your behalf, the truth would be obvious. Also, if you'll allow me to add my input as the court's master musician, I heard Irene cry *before* I heard her fall. It would be one thing if she cried after the fact, but it was almost as if she knew the attack was coming."

Blood instantly drained from her face.

Lord Alan viewed her countenance with a look of dissatisfaction, as if to say, “Over already?” He shrugged slightly and commanded the attention of the onlookers behind him as he went on, “You were pretty ill-prepared there at the end, Irene. Perhaps you intended your maneuvering to be clever, but you were dancing on the palm of His Highness’s hand. Especially today. You and your father were aiming for a checkmate, but instead you were swaying to a symphony of self-destruction.”

The onlookers parted, giving way to a short, plump, middle-aged man. Despite his nobleman’s attire, he had a pale complexion and a look of devastation on his face (which I suspected had something to do with the soldiers restraining him).

Lady Irene shrieked in surprise, “Father?!”

Beside me, the prince’s voice—at once light-hearted and yet also penetratingly cold—boomed. “Now then, shall we proceed to the main event?”

It was my first time seeing such a sharp gaze from him, directed at the people down below.

Act 3: The Unrivaled Prince

“Irene Palcas and Viscount Palcas, I hereby authorize your arrest for intent to cause bodily harm and for attempted assassination on Lady Elianna Bernstein. Guards!”

Lady Irene shrieked. The viscount was already cuffed, but now Irene had her hands bound as well. “No, Your Highness! This must be a mistake. I am the victim here, I’m the one who was harassed by Lady Elianna. Please open your eyes. I beg of you...! I spent time with you—the real you. Please return to your senses and be the wise man I know you to be!”

My heart ached hearing that, but the prince watched calmly and dutifully as she made her convincing appeal.

“Ordinarily such allegations would be considered a crime of damaging the integrity of the crown, but it is my duty to correct any misconceptions you might have. So, Lady Irene, in the interest of fairness, let us hear your claims.” He spoke in a clear voice, as if speaking indirectly to those gathered.

“First, the matter of the inner palace. Currently, Elianna has no official jurisdiction over the inner palace. The one managing it would be the current queen, my mother, who is responsible for and manages the ladies who come here for etiquette lessons. If you really did experience the harassment that you claim, then it falls on her shoulders as the person in charge. And as the crown prince, I will ensure that responsibility isn’t shirked.

“However,” he said, “keep in mind that if your allegations are found to be false, they will be taken as a crime—as *treason*—for harming the authority of the royal family. Now then, Lady Irene, is it true that you were harassed in the inner palace?”

“Uh! W-Well...” She was flustered; her gaze swam back and forth, all of the vim and vigor from moments ago now lost. Lady Irene must never have imagined that the crime she was trying to pin on me might instead end up as an accusation against the queen. One that could amount to treason.

“I-I have a witness...” Her eyes turned entreatingly to Lord Alan, whom she must have known was a dim hope at this point.

He offered her a sweet smile, one that seemed completely out of place here. “Hm, yes, I *am* sorry, but...all I can do is give testimony that you’re a victim who staged everything yourself. Oh, I should also add, we already know all the maids and soldiers you bought off, so you won’t be able to rely on them either.”

“So you’ve betrayed me...!”

“Mmm, just to make sure there are no misunderstandings here, allow me to explain. I’m the prince’s hidden trump card, one used for situations like this. I watch out at tea parties and evening parties to make sure there’s no one there looking to harm Lady Elianna. My current task was to keep my eyes on you since your movements were a bit suspicious.”

“No...” she gasped, her voice filled with despair.

I furrowed my brow a bit as well. My dismay was in part because I sympathized with her and felt they should’ve chosen a more appropriate place to carry out a hearing, but also because I found it questionable for a “hidden trump card” to out themselves so publicly. Wouldn’t this affect his ability to operate in the future?

The prince must have thought the same thing because he sighed exasperatedly. “Next, I’d like to address what you said a moment ago.”

Lady Irene suddenly snapped to attention, the strength returning to her eyes as she gazed up at the two of us. “Your Highness! My claims against Lady Elianna seem to have been a misunderstanding. But please believe me! I never planned anything like an assassination against her!”

The way she forsook an apology in favor of proclaiming her own innocence was an incredible display of both defiance and composure. No longer did she look the part of the delicate noble lady. This was her true nature. I had no doubt she’d laugh off my sympathy as being beneath her.

The prince replied coolly, “I already have evidence secured, but I can’t overlook what you said a moment ago. You mentioned it yourself. The watering incident in the rose garden. The damaged

ladder in the archives. The poisoned gift.”

Both Lady Irene and the viscount standing beside her flinched. But it was the viscount in particular who seemed restless, his gaze wandering.

His Highness continued. “The other day there was a fuss over some pipe failure in the rose garden and the resulting drainage. At the same time, something disastrous happened—an unidentified intruder broke into the palace. Would you happen to know anything about this incident, Viscount Palcas?”

“I-I know nothing! Nothing!”

“No? Well, fortunately this intruder was apprehended by Glen and the rest of the imperial guard, and we were able to ascertain that he was after Elianna’s life.”

The voices of those gathered erupted in surprise. Even I was left blinking in shock. It made sense now why Glen had appeared so shaken back then.

“In addition, we discovered damage to the ladders in the archives and a poisonous substance smeared across the books. And a foreign substance mixed in with tea leaves. All of these incidents targeting Elianna occurred immediately after Lady Irene was in the area, according to the report from Prince Theodore, my uncle.”

Now I understood why I had been barred from entering the archives. The reason why Prince Theodore was always so busy must have had something to do with this as well. Apparently the recent damage to the ladders I’d noticed hadn’t been natural deterioration either.

“Those are false accusations! All of that is circumstantial evidence. Someone else must have...someone suspicious—like a witch—must have done those things. I haven’t done anything of the like!” Lady Irene glowered daggers at me, revealing her hate and contempt for the first time.

“Besides, don’t you find it strange that someone as unworthy as the Bibliophile Princess has been occupying such an important position?! I’ve heard about her administering suspicious drugs to His Highness and the royal family. Do you really think someone like that deserves to be the queen of this country?! You’re just being deceived by her!” she appealed convincingly to the audience.

An air of confusion settled over the murmuring crowd. But even I could understand it wasn’t the reaction Lady Irene had hoped to provoke.

“...I see now,” said the prince.

A shiver ran down my spine. Immediately I felt the urge to run from His Highness, but knowing it would be disrespectful, I managed to resist the temptation.

Although Prince Christopher wore a smile on his face, it emanated a cold, chilling anger. “Now I understand what the difference is between your motivations and your father’s.”

“What...?”

His Highness ignored her confusion and turned to the crowd with his sunny blue eyes, as if turning the spotlight toward them. “I am not so conceited that I would personally boast about my betrothed’s accomplishments and worth. I’ll allow the rest of you to speak. Someone who knows what Eli has done, answer Lady Irene.”

Those gathered exchanged bewildered looks. I was just as confused as Lady Irene. This could cast a poor light on His Highness, given his position. There was some truth to what Lady Irene had said after all; I *was* the Bibliophile Princess.

“Um...” A man who looked like a civil official timidly spoke up, seeking permission to continue. Emboldened after the prince glanced at him approvingly, he turned toward Lady Irene. “My lady, you may not be aware of this, but it was Lady Elianna who uncovered those crimes in the Weimar Region—crimes including embezzlement, corruption, and collusion between the consul and the lord of the region. Since then, the fish carried in from Weimar Harbor have livened up the marketplace.”

“The Weimar Region? That’s where...” Another man, who appeared to be a servant from the kitchens, suddenly mumbled. He flinched as he realized what he was saying but continued the story once His Highness gave a prompting look. “The seafood cookbook that came from that region was utterly groundbreaking and...well, um, has been a great resource for us cooks.”

Another court lady agreed with him. “There was another book published at that same time, one depicting the daily life of a housewife in the Weimar Region, which became hugely popular. The queen even enjoyed reading it. She commented about how similar the struggles and anxieties of common housewives were to her own as queen. I heard it was all thanks to Lady Elianna acting as an intermediary with a relative’s publishing company.”

“Oh, speaking of books,” began one of the royal court doctors that was first summoned to the scene, pleasantly stroking his beard as he spoke. “From the book Lady Elianna requested, titled *The Travels of Parco Molo*, we discovered a new medicinal herb and its benefits. It’s effective in treating internal imbalances in women. It should have no effect on men, but... Hm. Word of it must’ve gotten distorted somewhere down the line.”

“Please allow me to speak,” a man requested politely. He was middle-aged and looked to be a divisional officer of the imperial guard. “I’ve heard it was also Lady Elianna who was the first to

predict the widespread damage that would result from an enormous cold wave in the country of Maldura last year, and she was also the one who proposed we buy double the supplies in anticipation of it. Thanks to her, the warmongering Maldurans are in our debt after we provided them provisions and aid. Now if they try to start a war with us, their own people will be against them.”

“Oh my,” came the voices of several noble women. They must’ve accompanied their husbands here.

One elaborated, “The same goes for the Suiran weave, a type of weaving from the marquess’s territory that borders Maldura. That specific technique for weaving fabric was falling out of use, but Lady Elianna brought it back, and it’s now in fashion with the nobles.”

“Yes,” continued another. “So popular, in fact, that I’ve been having a rough time getting my hands on it. There’s a six month waiting list!”

“There weren’t really any specialties of note from the marquess’s territory before, but thanks to that, they’re now booming with weavers.”

“Dear me, now that I think about it, there’s a pen that’s been a popular gift for noblemen for the past four years, imported from the east. Lady Elianna was the one who called attention to it.”

“It’s famous among women as well, since it doesn’t require as much force to use as a quill pen,” another added, the ladies laughing amongst themselves.

Talk spread like wildfire. Things such as, “People have had their attention on meteorologists ever since,” and, “Lady Elianna put in a recommendation for a new, improved loom,” and, “Both the researchers deciphering ancient history and the chief herbalist are doggedly chasing Lady Elianna around for her input,” and, “Now other regional lords whose domains lack stand-out specialties are looking to Lady Elianna for advice.”

The more I listened, the more dread consumed me. It was less because of the familiar stories they told and more so that the woman of whom they spoke was not Elianna the Bibliophile Princess but someone else altogether. This had to be some kind of mistake, I was sure.

Almost as soon as I got the urge to flee, I felt a sudden arm wrap tight around my waist, pulling me close. I looked up to find Prince Christopher’s eyes, blue as a vast ocean, threatening to swallow me up.

Why was it, I wondered. He was smiling at me, yet his face seemed to say, “I won’t let you get away.”

“It appears you are all well aware of my betrothed’s accomplishments and influence.” His gaze was brilliant, his voice

commanding and kingly as it boomed through the hall. The admiring eyes of the audience down below immediately gathered on him (and by extension, me). Lady Irene was the only one at the base of the steps who was in a daze, and it was to her that His Highness turned his attention. "But it appears there is one amongst you who didn't even try to understand. Ordinarily I would tell you to learn your place, but it's thanks to that faux pas you just narrowly reduced one of the charges levied against you, Lady Irene."

"What in the world are you talking about...?" she muttered, her malice completely deflated by this point.

The prince's eyes were sharp as they turned to the man behind her. An audible gulp could be heard. "One month ago, Earl Casull came to the royal family saying he had discovered Zelger, a piece of porcelain from the Age of the Hero King, recognized as the royal family's hidden treasure. The inspector appraised it as authentic, but Elianna recognized it as a fake. So, does that mean that Earl Casull and the inspector were trying to deceive the royal family? The inspector is one thing, but the Casull family is renowned for generations of loyal nobles. Could the earl of that kind of family really do such a thing?"

His tone made it clear that the question—one directed at those present—was rhetorical. He kept his gaze locked on Viscount Palcas. "Once I started looking into it closer, I found a trend had begun lately among nobles and merchants of gathering artworks and exhibiting them. But there was also frequent fuss about counterfeits. There seemed to be only one person pulling the strings on that operation, but they were being too discreet for us to catch. The inspector, who we'd allowed to remain loose, suddenly died under suspicious circumstances, and an ominous shadow began to loom around Elianna.

"Did they hold a grudge against her for unveiling the counterfeit, one that would have caused the downfall of Earl Casull had it not been detected so early? Or did they want to get rid of her so their own daughter could take her place? Well, which was it, Viscount Palcas?"

The man, still bound by the soldiers, elegantly leapt to his feet once called. "I-I don't know anything! Just what proof do you have of any of this?!"

"Indeed," the prince replied thoughtfully. "You gave me the run around in that regard. When your daughter approached me, I figured it was under your suggestion, but it seems she wasn't privy to all of your evil deeds. Well...I do still consider her an accomplice in the rose garden incident with the intruder as well as the poison attempt.

"Lady Irene told me much. She appealed for my compassion, citing the discord between the main Casull family and yours, telling

me how your family was once long ago from a western archipelago prior to being incorporated as a branch family. And how even now you employ a craftsman skilled at wood carving using techniques passed down from your ancient homeland.”

The viscount trembled, his face as white as paper.

His Highness smiled maliciously as he recalled the past. “When I heard, I almost forgot myself and nearly laughed. No wonder I couldn’t find anything even after searching your territory and related merchant families. I never dreamed you’d hide the counterfeits with the forestry goods—right there with the lumber on the edge of the Neville River.”

The prince lifted his gaze at the perfect moment, right as Lord Glen and a respectably dressed gentleman appeared. A wealthy air seemed to permeate around the upright-looking older man, who took a knee below us. Meanwhile, Lord Glen dashed up the steps and relieved the prince of his burden, trading the books for a stack of documents.

His Highness took a cursory glance through them, then turned his vibrant blue eyes sharply to the base of the stairs. “Evidence has been secured. Among wood materials in Viscount Palcas’s possession, we’ve seized a number of counterfeit artworks as well as what appears to be Zelger replicas. As a noble of this kingdom, you should be well aware that replicating Zelger is a crime akin to treason against the royal family. We have seized poison from a merchant family with intimate ties to the viscount, one of the same variety used to try to harm Marquess Bernstein’s daughter. We also have proof the viscount is connected with the intruder who broke into the palace. Have you any defense for yourself, Viscount Palcas?”

Crestfallen, the viscount crumpled to his knees. The prince had been hounding him for answers before, but apparently he was only waiting for the actual proof to be delivered. Now the viscount looked like an empty husk with no willpower to spout any more excuses.

His Highness next turned his attention to the older gentleman still kneeling. “Earl Casull, while you are one of the victims in this counterfeit scandal, I must also tell you that as the main family, you’re deeply responsible for not preventing the secret maneuvering of your branch family.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” came the rumbling, earnest voice of the kneeling earl, head lowered. “We of the Casull family are painfully aware of the weight of our responsibility in this affair. We ask that you deal with us however you deem fit.” His voice swelled with emotion. “It brings shame on our family that we could not see the counterfeit of the royal family’s hidden treasure, Zelger, for what it was. I would like to thank the young lady of the Bernstein house for

preventing any dishonor from befalling the royal family. Presumptuous though it may be, we of the Casull family would like to extend our support for Lady Elianna Bernstein to be crowned Her Royal Highness.”

...Pardon?

I almost lost my footing. I was under the impression that there'd been no official talks of our marriage.

Earl Casull's words lit a fuse with those at the base of the stairs; they erupted into murmurs, excitement spreading.

Prince Christopher returned the stack of papers back to Lord Glen and relieved me of the last few books still held in my arms. Then once again he wrapped his arm firmly around my waist, pulling me close. It was a complete change from the arbitrator of justice that he'd been moments ago. His smile, now dazzling and bright, turned to shine down on those below before I even had the opportunity to say anything.



“I appreciate that, Earl Casull. We will happily accept your blessing.”

No, Your Highness, I'm quite certain I'm the one who should be responding here.

“While I realize it's indiscreet to do this here publicly, thanks to this incident, I have had the opportunity to hear your unreserved opinions about Elianna. Thus, I shall now ask. If there are any amongst you that would disapprove of me taking Lady Elianna Bernstein as my princess, I bid you step forward.”

There was no way anyone would oppose. Even Lady Irene was in a daze and unable to speak. Her biased claims had all been debunked by the people of various noble standings that had vouched for me. On top of all that, her father's wrongdoings had been revealed as well.

I could sympathize; my head was also in an unmeasured state of disarray. After four entire years, I'd only just realized there was something else looming beneath the prince's dazzling smile.

One or two people began to clap, and soon the entire room joined in with boisterous cheers. It was almost as if we really were on stage, at the end of the grand finale. The prince took it in with a wide grin, promising an official announcement before the curtain (metaphorically) fell and the crowd dispersed.

As for me, not only had I suddenly had a script thrust upon me, I'd somehow been given a star role. And yet it wasn't until it was all over that I realized I'd never even said a single line the entire time.

Act 4: After the Curtain Closes

I remained in a daze even as His Highness wrapped an arm around my waist and guided me down the hallway to his office. On the way, an exhausted-looking Lord Glen shared his report on what they found by the river, and then the prince began giving him further orders. But before we could make it to our destination, we ran into Prince Theodore and Lord Alexei, who were lying in wait.

It was only then that I realized the two of them had been absent from the dramatic theater moments before. Perhaps they were concerned that their collective presence, as people intimately close with the prince, might make the whole event look staged. It was a shame; in the book my aunt had forced me to read to her, all of the pivotal characters had appeared on stage together.

But wait a moment... Just when had the curtain even raised on this play? And just what kind of script had been arranged for it? Had I not been cast as the Bibliophile Princess after all? Had I misread the script somehow at some point? My head spun in circles, soaring to the peak of

confusion.

After Prince Theodore received the book from His Highness (the same one I'd intended to return to the archives), he suddenly peered at me anxiously and asked, "Eli? Are you all right?" His ultramarine eyes, a shade darker than the prince's, watched me in earnest. "My apologies. I am sure Chris has said as much already, but you were in danger. That's why we couldn't allow you near the archives. It was also out of concern for your well-being that the personnel there tried to keep you from the books. They were all worried they might have hurt your feelings as a result. But please, worry no longer. You're welcome to use the archives again, as you always have."

This was the Prince Theodore I knew—the same one I always discussed books with. I felt my shoulders relax and breathed a sigh of relief. "...Of course."

Prince Theodore suddenly gave a small, mischievous grin. "That said, you did better than I thought you would, Chris—manipulating the situation to push talk of your marriage forward." He must've watched it all unfold.

The prince looked disgruntled, but he quickly flipped it around and flashed a vibrant smile back at his uncle. "The one who makes the first move claims victory. I even took down the last barrier I had in front of me, Earl Casull. Now the older Marquess Bernstein should have nothing to fuss over."

I jerked my head up instinctively at the sudden mention of my grandfather's name.

Prince Theodore had a malicious grin on his face. "I figured the finale was approaching. You'd best thank me for calling Eli here. Of course, it'd suit me just as well if things had gone sour for you instead."

The prince suddenly bristled back. "I do believe I've already asked you numerous times to *please* cease your illicit solicitations toward my—*your nephew's*—fiancée. Besides, aren't you a little old for her?"

I was pretty sure I caught His Highness whispering at the end, "You damn pedo," under his breath, or something equally unbecoming of his stature. Surely it was just my imagination.

"Age gaps are common among married nobles," said Prince Theodore. "Plus, I am the most compatible with Eli. Although, a certain someone keeps glowering and has been for a long while now. And quite ferociously at that, I might add."

"You act far too intimate with her! And while we're on the topic, stop casually calling her by her nickname over and over again!"

...Where was the prince from a few moments ago who had so level-headedly exposed the viscount (and his daughter) for their crimes?

As I watched the exchange, blinking in surprise, a cold voice cut in, oozing with displeasure. "Please cease with the teasing. We have a mountain of work now, both in dealing with the aftermath of this case and the prince's announcement." Lord Glen hung his head and expelled a ragged breath, worn thin from exhaustion.

"Seriously... I mean it, enough is enough. I don't care how pressed for time you were or how much you were being pressured, you didn't give the rest of us any warning before dragging us into this mess. Did you mean to drive us into an early grave with all that work? Giving us only three days to pull together evidence for a case we'd been privately investigating for a month. I'll curse you for the rest of my life if I get hit with multiple transfer requests from my squad after this."

"Well said," agreed Lord Alexei, not even trying to mask his irritation. "After generations of absence, we finally pulled Sauslind's Brain back onto the political center stage, and you nearly drove them back into isolation. Four whole years you had, and what on earth were you doing that whole time, oh 'handsome prince'?" His words dripped thick with sarcasm.

The prince had a bitter look on his face. "I didn't choose Eli as my partner because she's from the Bernstein family."

"I'm aware. Please reserve your love confessions and the like for when the two of you are alone together. I can't tolerate the stupidity of it." Lord Alexei was indifferent as ever, flipping through a stack of papers.

A new cast member made an entrance, their voice bright and cheerful. "You sure said it. No one would ever guess the 'handsome prince' is, in truth, a helpless weakling. If she'd known, Lady Irene might've been able to take a different approach at winning him over." It was Lord Alan, the golden-haired master court musician, with a mischievous grin on his face.

Slipping past the others, he approached and swiftly took one of my hands in his, planting a kiss on the back of it. I found myself reflected in his cunning emerald green eyes. "Allow me to reintroduce myself, Lady Elianna Bernstein. I am Alan Ferrera, and it was I who spread the nickname 'Fairy Princess' for you. I hope you can be as open with me as you are with Alex and the rest."

Fairy Princess? I blinked and inwardly dismissed it. What kind of joke was that?

To be honest, back when I lived in our territory, there was one other name I was known by—the "Library Ghost." My hair was a faded blonde with tight curls, something I'd inherited from my late mother, and it hung loose and unrestrained down my back. Apparently that made it stand out in poorly-lit areas. On top of that,

since I spent all my time inside reading, my skin was a pale snow white, and since books were my only companions, my face lacked much expression. Those qualities just further contributed to my image as a “ghost.”

One time the children of the region challenged each other to a test of courage to see who was brave enough to approach the library’s ghost. Another time when the weather was poor and the sun was setting, one of the new handmaids discovered me among the dark stacks and fled screaming, “Th-The ghost appeared!”

...Did I truly resemble a spirit that much? If my options were such that I could choose between being compared to something inhuman and being called Bibliophile Princess, the latter was clearly the better choice. In fact, such a nickname would be a badge of honor among the Bernsteins. After all, “biblio-” meant book and “-phile” meant lover, so a lover of books.

As I inwardly rejected the unbecoming nickname of “Fairy Princess,” Prince Christopher promptly slapped Lord Alan’s hand away with an audible clap. “Why didn’t you stop things before they got that far?” His Highness demanded. “Everything turned out reasonably well, but now that you have outed yourself publicly, it will make your role difficult in the future.”

Lord Alan scoffed and launched into a rebuttal, not looking the least bit guilty for what he’d done. “You’re the one who called the viscount there to finish him off, no? I didn’t think we would be able to relieve Lady Elianna of her misunderstandings about the situation without doing the same to her as well. Plus, it annoyed me that we couldn’t land a decisive blow against her because *you* drove Lady Elianna from the palace. Thus, things ended the way they did.”

The way he spoke was light-hearted and forthcoming, but there was a twinge of mocking there on his lips. “Plus, it’s high time you revealed the truth about me anyways. It’s already common knowledge among clever noblewomen, as well as the queen and her entourage. In fact, every time I’m with Lady Elianna it just reinforces how overprotective and head-over-heels you—”

The prince slapped a hand over his mouth, muffling the words. My eyes had been on him even before that, blinking in confusion.

“Um...” I began. Though his sentence hung incomplete, part of what he said captured my attention, and I first apologized to Lord Alan. As the prince’s confidant and someone who had kept an eye out for me, albeit from the shadows, he surely deserved gratitude. “Please accept my apology for not noticing you until now. I appreciate you looking out for me all this time, Maestro.”

“...It’s Alan.” His eyes turned vacant as if he’d lost all confidence as he mumbled, “So you really never did notice me... Not even once

these past four years. And here I'm supposed to be just as popular among women as His Highness and yet... Hahaha..."

I felt most apologetic about that. This was one of the reasons high society and I didn't see eye to eye; I had difficulty remembering people's faces. Yet when it came to books, I could memorize a vast array of different topics.

Lord Alan's expression soured when the prince snorted in laughter. His half-lidded eyes glowered unreservedly back. "Well, at least I'm not like the helpless, weakling prince. I didn't ask for her aunt's help to drive her from the palace, only to cause a misunderstanding and provoke Lady Elianna's disgust. Don't you remember? When she shoved that book at you, you looked as white as a blank sheet of paper—no, more appropriately, ash from a cold fireplace."

The prince froze instantly, and Lord Theodore amusedly interjected, "You had a Bernstein shove a book back at you? That's almost as unheard of as...as the sun rising from the west."

Lord Glen spoke up in a thin, weak voice. "Guys...cut it out, please. That was what started this whole nightmare, what brought it out." He mumbled, "The prince's *real* form..." Now it was his turn to look vacant, tears beading in his eyes. He must've really been run ragged from this incident.

I inwardly reflected on my actions, feeling both sympathy and compassion for him. Now I understood that what I'd done back then had been very immature. Ultimately it had been false assumptions and misunderstandings on my part. I surely couldn't blame Lady Irene either.

Just then, a voice called to me from behind and I looked back. "Eli!" My brother, Alfred, came dashing toward me, prompting me to hurry to meet him. Seeing the face of a family member seemed to release all the pent-up tension in my body I didn't even realize was there.

"Dear Alfred!"

He studied my face once I was close, eyes—the same ashen gray as my father's—flickering with emotion. "I heard about the commotion... Are you all right?" Alfred worriedly swept my bangs back. It was the same habit he'd had since we were kids; his way of checking my complexion.

It made me smile. "Yes, I am."

I had complex feelings about Lady Irene already, but if things had gone her way, I would've caused enormous trouble for my brother and father. The warmth of his hand was a sharp reminder that this was not a stage. This was reality.

"Well, with Prince Christopher here, I don't expect anything

would happen to you,” my brother said, lifting his eyes to meet the prince who had strode over.

The prince had reclaimed his dazzling smile. “Please inform your grandfather and Marquess Bernstein that I’ve met every single one of their conditions. I would appreciate it if they would overlook the fact that I exceeded their time limit.”

Alfred slipped a bittersweet smile and nodded. “I’ll be sure to do that.” Then sharply corrected his tone to say, “However...if I ever see my sister look so heartbroken again, even if it means mobilizing all of the brainpower at the Bernsteins’ disposal, I will make sure you don’t get away with it. So keep that in mind.”

The prince’s face gave a small twitch. “I will take that to heart,” he replied, voice stiff.

Lord Alexei cut in with a long sigh, passing several documents over to my brother. Then he added, “As for the holiday you requested, if we were to grant you that time off, the prime minister would collapse from overwork in three days. The Ministry of Finance as well. In Marquess Bernstein’s absence, confusion and chaos would reign, and the national treasure’s recovery would be in vain and begin its decline once more. Therefore, under the authority of His Majesty, you have been denied.”

“Well, I figured that would be the case,” said Alfred in defeat. The two were already close, given that they were both civil officials.

Judging by the way his shoulders sank as he looked at the documents, he must’ve felt the same as my father, wanting to break away to read to his heart’s content. I felt bad knowing I was the only one in such a fortunate position.

Lord Alexei’s icy blue eyes turned sharp, having seen straight through my brother’s heart. “Besides, you Bernsteins,” he began to say, only for my brother to cut him off in a panic.

“Uhh, umm, Your Highness! And Eli too. His Majesty and the prime minister would like to see you two. They requested that you ‘report in detail.’”

This time it was Prince Christopher’s turn to act flustered as he drew me close to him. “Tell them we have an urgent matter and will require a bit of extra time. A most important affair, one that’s life or death to the royal family. Uncle, Alex, I will be entrusting you with delivering my message.” He blurted that out quickly, then dragged me along with him and fled the room.

The people we left behind watched us with exasperated looks, and once again I had a question mark floating inside my head.

A matter of life or death to the royal family...?

He dragged me the rest of the way to his office. After having the staff pour us some tea, he quickly shooed everyone else away until it was just the two of us.

There was one thing I wanted to ask—*had* to ask—first, before anything else.

...Why are you here right now with me, Your Highness?

For someone who had spoken of an “urgent matter, one of life or death to the royal family,” he sure enjoyed drinking his tea leisurely. Plus, the way he sighed with his whole body sounded as if he were utterly relieved.

Then he faced me and slowly outstretched his hands. One hand lingered at the cusp of my cheek, just close enough to touch but far enough not to, the tip of his finger brushing against my ear and tangling inside the fluffy locks of my hair.

“I’ve finally caught you,” he said.

The smile on his face was far sweeter than any I’d seen before, and my cheeks instantly burned red, all the way to the tops of my ears. His lips spread even wider, his sunny blue eyes softening.

“I’m sorry, Eli, for causing so many misunderstandings and so much anxiety for you.”

I nearly tilted my head in confusion, but froze when I remembered doing so would mean touching his hand.

The prince chuckled mischievously as he continued. “Actually, four years ago...no, in reality it started almost ten years ago... Well, I digress, your grandfather and Marquess Bernstein said they would accept our marriage if I fulfilled certain conditions.”

“What conditions?” I asked.

“Well, the first one was to make the nobles agree to our marriage without using the Bernsteins’ hidden name. The second was for you to be more interested in me than you are in books.”

I was at a loss for words.

His Highness chuckled, lightly tracing his hand across my cheek before drawing it away. “The time limit was four years, until your eighteenth birthday. If I couldn’t meet their conditions before then, our engagement would be annulled and you, Alfred, and the marquess would all leave the palace to hole up in your territory.”

“Goodness...”

I hadn’t known any of this. In fact, this was entirely different from what I’d heard at the beginning.

The prince gave a small sigh. “That’s why I wasn’t able to force our marriage along, not even after I became of age. I’m sorry for worrying you.” He looked me right in the eye as he delivered his apology.

I recoiled a bit, trying desperately to tamp down my hammering

heart. "If you'd only told me from the start," I said.

"Indeed." His blue eyes grew distant, as if staring vacantly. "If I'd told you back then, the absolute first thing you would've said is, 'You needn't go to such trouble. Please just arrange for a different bride.'"

"..."

I had nothing to say in my defense. I must admit, it was true that back then I was lured in by access to the royal archive. Even so, if he would have explained the situation to me, I was sure I would have accepted it and—oh, who am I kidding? If he'd told me that I could choose to keep my current (free) lifestyle or live as the crown prince's betrothed, I would've chosen the former without a doubt. I wouldn't budge on sacrificing precious reading time.

"...I'm sorry," I said at last.

"It makes things awkward for me if you apologize about that. But well, at least in the end you finally showed more interest in me than books, didn't you?" Then he added, "Although the way you did it was a bit...*a lot* different than what I'd envisioned." For a moment it seemed as if his face had grown stiff, but then he flashed me a smile.

He was talking about how I shoved that book he'd given me back at him. It was true; in that moment, all books seemed valueless to me—*me*, the Bibliophile Princess.

"Your Highness," I began to say but hesitated.

I understood that what had happened was a misunderstanding with false assumptions on my part. Even so, my emotions hadn't quite processed all of that. Up until this morning, I'd thought that our annulment was just a matter of time and that His Highness and Lady Irene had feelings for one another.

"Yes?" His Highness responded gently, as if unraveling the tangle of my emotions. He casually, and yet firmly, clasped my hand as it rested on my lap. "I made you even more anxious with everything that happened with Lady Irene. I truly am sorry. I've been watching her ever since the commotion over Zelger being a fake.

"At first she was just spreading incoherent rumors so I let her be, but I couldn't after she began aiming for your life. Whether that was because she was instigated by her father or because she sought to take advantage of the situation, I wasn't sure. Either way, as soon as I knew you were in danger, I wanted to clap her in chains."

The prince's graceful features contorted, his expression changing from serious to anguished. "But if I did that, the real puppet master, Viscount Palcas, might have sacrificed her as a scapegoat and feigned ignorance to escape prosecution. So Alex persuaded me against it, and I had no choice but to leave you with two capable bodyguards while I tried to collect evidence against the viscount. That's where he revealed his annoying talent for discretion. His actions were

suspicious enough to stick out like a sore thumb, but credible evidence of his actions remained elusive.”

The way he glowered and combed a hand through his hair, as if recalling the irritation he’d felt, took me by surprise. Publicly he conducted himself in a way appropriate for his station, but when he was involved in government affairs or with his inner circle, this was the kind of attitude he took. When a man presented himself like that, unembellished and unadorned, it gave a woman the impression that she was special. It was sinful, really, for him to do that to me.

Unaware of my inner reaction, the prince suddenly let slip a scornful laugh. One I’d never heard before, one dangerous and terrifying.

“And while I was preoccupied with that mess, they dispatched an assassin to the palace. The poison Lady Irene used wasn’t lethal, it was just dangerous enough to make someone ill...but even so, I felt I’d run out of options.”

The prince suppressed the flood of hostility he felt, but the rage still dripped from his words and shone in his eyes. “Glen and Alex did what they could to investigate Lady Irene, but they weren’t able to obtain anything definitive. I knew it might look strange in the eyes of the people if I started investigating myself, but I had to do it. And so I had no other choice but to force you away from the palace for a bit.”

“...That’s why you sought my aunt’s help?”

“Yes,” he replied with a nod and a sigh. He suddenly stood, long legs striding over to his work desk where he retrieved a tome, then glanced back at me. “It just wound up causing a misunderstanding with you in the end. My mind went completely blank when you thrust your book back at me. But if not for all of that, you might not have realized how you really felt.”

The way he smiled as he spoke indicated he’d regained his composure. He kept the smile on his face as he approached, settling back into his seat beside me. The prince watched me, his eyes kind and yet mischievous, as if he could see right through to my pounding heart. I could feel the blood rise to my cheeks. Just how much was I dancing to his tune here?

“But I do regret that I hurt you enough for you to shove your book back at me. I’d been searching for this one for quite a while. I wanted to see the joy on your face when I gave it to you. Would you...accept it once more?” He held out the rare tome I’d returned to him the other day.

My heart ached as the memories flooded back. When I let go of it before, I’d felt an emptiness like all the color had drained out of me. I’d thought that the gift had been meaningless to him and that there’d been nothing special about it at all. Now that the misunderstanding

had been cleared up and I could see the tension in his earnest eyes, feelings that couldn't be described in words bubbled up within me. He said he'd searched for it for me—to see the joy on my face.

“Yes... Thank you, Prince Christopher.” It was as if I was taking a hold of those feelings I'd let go of back then, and as I gazed back into His Highness's eyes, I had to desperately fight against the shame that drove me to want to flee.

His shoulders relaxed once I took the book in my hands. He looked relieved—genuinely relieved—from the bottom of his heart. “Eli.” Once more he took my hand in his and peeked at my face with a heartwarming smile. And as his dazzling smile and sunny blue eyes approached, the romantic atmosphere silently urged me to close my eyes.

“Your Highness...” As that sweet air enveloped us, I opened my mouth (as I always did) and cut in to ask, “What exactly is this ‘hidden name’ that my family has?”

The prince's head fell in dejection just as he was an inch away from reaching me. “You could've saved that question for later, you know,” he mumbled, voice filled with grief for some reason.

Oh my, did I do something inappropriate?

He let out a soft, sorrowful sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose, as if trying to recompose himself. Then he turned his gaze back at me. “Before I tell you about that, I want to make sure you don't misunderstand.”

“All right.”

“I don't want to be with you *because* of your hidden name as a Bernstein. That's one thing I absolutely don't want you to misunderstand.”

His beautiful blue eyes took hold of me and refused to release me. He'd been calling me by my nickname this entire time, but I hadn't even had the opportunity to take note of that. His smile was so utterly intense I felt myself recoiling.

“If you don't believe me, I can push you down right now and prove it to you.”

Excuse me?!

Frantic, I gathered my wits about me and whipped my head back and forth like a bobble head doll.

The prince grinned and launched into his explanation. The Bernstein family had a hidden name as “Sauslind's Brain.” Only the royal family and a select few knew of this name. The kings whom the Bernsteins had served all had equally prosperous reigns.

“Well, that's...an honor to hear, but...” I was a bit confused. Was he telling me that our house wasn't actually just a collection of book lovers? But my brother and father were certainly no exception to that

rule.

His Highness gave a bitter laugh. “Marquess Bernstein and Alfred showed enormous, outstanding skill from the moment they were employed at the palace. But the Bernsteins have no interest in power and instead choose to spend their time buried in books. So there were those, like the prime minister and Alex, who were just waiting for an opportunity to saddle them with an official position.”

“Oh my...”

It would seem the reason the two of them were weighed down by such heavy responsibility wasn’t solely because I was chosen as His Highness’s betrothed. I was surprised at this revelation, yet it also made sense. The reason my family was able to attach conditions to our engagement was thanks to the influence afforded to them by that hidden name. But compared to the collective authority of the palace, we were still nothing more than a minor noble family.

Prince Christopher laughed. “The fact that you Bernsteins don’t place much importance on your own skills is both a virtue and a flaw.” Then he added, “Unfortunately, that’s why for several generations now your family has spent their entire lives working in the archives.”

No, Your Highness, there’s nothing unfortunate about that. That would be the dream job for any Bernstein.

“You have shown those same skills yourself, Eli. Do you remember?”

“Not in the least,” I confessed, brows drawn together.

The prince let out a sigh that almost sounded like a laugh. “The embezzlement incident in the Weimar Region.”

I scanned back through my memory, using “Weimar Region” as a keyword. If memory served me right, that was just after I joined the prince as his betrothed. Back then, I was still unused to reading my books in His Highness’s office, and the whole thing started because something about the conversation between Alexei and the prince had captured my attention.

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Weimar was a region facing out toward the sea with a port city. In recent years, fishing there had yielded poor catches and subsequently caused a revenue deficiency, thus His Highness and Lord Alexei were discussing a tax reduction.

Suspicious, I voiced my doubts without hesitation. “Hasn’t Weimar had a good fishing haul these past six months?” The prince blinked in surprise and replied coolly, seeking more information, so I spoke frankly. “I read about it in a book that came out a month ago, a travel log by author Dan Edold, one talking about the fishing

techniques of the Weimar Region. In it, he wrote about how delicious the region's delicacies—which use the sami fish—are.”

Lord Alexei furrowed his brows as if to say, “And what’s your point?” He didn’t actually say the words himself, but I could hear the question in my head, causing me to falter. Still, I answered him.

“Author Dan’s literary style isn’t for everyone, so he’s not very popular, but his records are accurate. He never mentioned anything about the Weimar Region suffering from poor fishing hauls. And the book was written with materials he collected when he visited this year, so he wasn’t referencing the past. Furthermore...” I hesitated a bit. This was a bit embarrassing to say. “I was curious and wanted to know what exactly sami cuisine was like, so...I sent for a copy of the community newsletter.”

“The community newsletter?” His Highness echoed in surprise.

I nodded. “I couldn’t find any cookbooks, so I thought there might be something written in the community newsletter. The contents of it were quite lively and interesting, so I sent for copies of each one for the past six months. There were no articles mentioning anything about a poor fishing haul. In fact, it mentioned just the opposite; business was booming for the fishermen. There were also a number of fliers regarding sami cuisine as well. There was nothing about it that gave me the impression they were struggling economically from bad catches though.”

Things wouldn’t be so lively there if the fishing industry were suffering, nor would the fishermen have booming businesses if that were the case. And there wouldn’t be such a number of delicacies using fish as their ingredient either.

After I shared all of that, His Highness and Alexei suddenly turned grim and regarded one another. The prince immediately gave his orders. “Alex, conduct an immediate investigation on the liege lord of the Weimar Region and the consul.”

Soon after, it was discovered that they were colluding and abusing the law, and their embezzlement was brought to light.

The expression on my face must have looked pitiful, I was sure. “But you and Lord Alexei were the ones who researched it and uncovered their crimes, no?” It was no accomplishment of mine.

Prince Christopher laughed and shook his head. “If not for what you told us, we’d never have realized. Plus, you were the one who published that cookbook, weren’t you? That man from earlier today mentioned it as well, but that was what caused the boom in seafood popularity.

“That was also the first time I’d ever even heard that something like a ‘community newsletter’ existed. You were also the one who noticed the short column with the housewife writing about her

everyday life and recommended it for publishing. And since that was so resoundingly popular, the publishing companies are now watching to see what captures your interest next.”

I was a bit flabbergasted. The reason those recipes were collected into a cookbook was because our house’s cook requested as much. As for the comment columns that were combined into a book, that was simply because I wanted to read them all together. I had no idea what would catch on in this world and what wouldn’t.

“But your biggest achievement was probably the incident with Maldura.”

I tipped my head down thoughtfully. Now that he mentioned it, I did remember giving several (unsolicited) remarks before, during one of his meetings.

On top of the usual faces seen in His Highness’s office, there were others involved with crop management there as well. Wheat had seen a bountiful harvest this year, so they were trying to plan how to keep the market from collapsing as a result.

“You should buy up as much as you can to stockpile,” I said at the time.

The prince prompted me for an explanation with an air about him that indicated he was used to my intrusions. I still felt a bit unsure of myself but proceeded to explain nonetheless. “Six months ago when I helped air out some of the books in the royal archives, we discovered a memorandum from the curator three generations prior...”

Lord Alexei, accustomed to the way I led into my explanations from seemingly out of nowhere, motioned for me to continue.

“According to that memorandum, in the year it was written Sauslind saw a bountiful harvest, but other countries suffered a cold wave and drought. The aftermath of those disasters sent those countries into political disarray domestically and culminated in Maldura launching an invasion on us.”

“And you’re trying to say the same thing will happen this year?”

“With all due respect, there’s been no such report from the meteorologists.” The agriculture commissioner regarded me with suspicion. Crop harvests and weather were deeply connected, so of course they were already coordinating with the meteorologists.

I hesitated before responding, “Climate disasters don’t necessarily happen every year we have a bountiful harvest. I believe that’s what makes it difficult for meteorologists to predict their occurrence. But then I also remembered there was an academic book from almost fifty years ago—one that’s now out of print—a weather log called *Breath of Ars* by author Yulin Coral. An identical incident was recorded there.”

I recalled the volume, one I’d read in our regional library long ago. “Author Coral’s book recorded the same precedent as the

memorandum, and Coral tried to bring attention to the matter, but their book relied on myths and was discounted for being unacademic, which is why it fell out of print. Still, the point of author Coral's argument is the exact same.

"As for the memorandum from the archives, the author wrote that when they were younger, the same phenomenon occurred in other countries. In *Breath of Ars*, Coral also mentioned that this precedent appeared in the region on a much smaller scale. Both of these people believed that there were certain conditions that would trigger this climate disaster, that there was a law governing them."

"Certain conditions?"

"Indeed," I said, "and I was curious, so I looked into it myself."

It wasn't just Sauslind Kingdom. If bountiful harvests continued throughout one portion of the Ars continent, that would trigger a climate disaster in another region. Those conditions were difficult to discern, however, since they weren't one hundred percent accurate. Still, I suspected you could make a statistically-based prediction. So I sought the cooperation of one of the other unoccupied meteorologists and a writer specializing in climate, consulted Prince Theodore, and collected climate information from other countries—which, of course, proved difficult to obtain. Information from other countries often tended to be hard to get a hold of. We were still in the midst of searching back through the continent's merchant's records, but...

"Most likely, or rather, there's a seventy percent chance that the northwestern part of the continent, including Maldura, will suffer from a cold wave this year."

A wave of tension ran through the faces of those gathered.

"Could I ask to see those statistics?" said the commissioner.

I sent along a note to give Prince Theodore an overview of what was happening, but Lord Alexei calmly asked us to hold off on sending for the chamberlain.

"Even if your predictions on the damages of this cold wave *are* accurate, what reason does that give for our country to buy up the wheat?" He continued, "In fact, I think we should just regulate the market and keep an eye on circulation."

"Indeed," Lord Glen agreed, with the face of a military man. "We should strengthen our watch around the Malduran border. There's a good chance they'll try to invade. We should contact the marquess there and prepare a countermeasure."

"Do you plan to meet fire with fire every time this happens?" I asked quietly. Every time I read history books, there was always one thing I found strange. Why did it have to come to war? Why didn't those who perpetrated war try to learn from their forebears?

I went on. "Does it give you peace of mind to bolster our country's

defenses when you feel the threat of another country's might? Is it the way of a civilized country to meet violence with violence? We aren't barbarians. We're civilized people equipped with wisdom as our weapon."

The room fell dead silent.

I continued to voice my thoughts. "It's easy to start war. However, you also lose a substantial amount (of books, primarily) in the process. That is what history has taught me. We should not wait for war to be waged against us. If we truly are a civilized country, we should nip it in the bud before it begins."

"I see your point," muttered Lord Alexei, deep in thought. "That would be the ideal approach, as Lady Elianna said, but do you think that logic of yours is something a country like Maldura, that prides itself on brute force, can comprehend?"

I smiled back at him. "No, I don't. But why must we respond by lowering ourselves to another's level? We have our own way of doing things. Is it not the role of our civil officials to use their wit and intellect to come up with such countermeasures?"

Lord Glen looked as if he'd broken into a slight cold sweat.

Lord Alexei's ice blue eyes gleamed sharply.

But it was Prince Christopher who let out a snicker. "Alex, you lost this one. No matter how just the cause, war is an act of murder. The age of warring countries, where the victor is heralded for their might, is over. This is a different age. All that's left in the wake of war is lives you can never regain and deep-seated resentment likely to trigger another conflict. As someone set to inherit the throne of a kingdom, I don't want to step into war lightly. If there is something we can do to prevent it, we should consider our options.

"Send for a meteorologist, my uncle, and the statistics that Elianna researched. Deliver a notice to His Majesty and the prime minister that I want to hold an emergency meeting with them first thing this afternoon." The prince briskly distributed his orders and everyone set to work.

I felt a responsibility as the person who had researched those statistics so, as impertinent as it was, I took a seat at the edge of the meeting.

That was the story the divisional officer from before had been referring to—the story of how our country avoided war with Maldura.

I shrank back, recalling the number of impertinent things I'd said at the time.

The prince gazed at me softly. "Ever since that incident, you've been popular with the military housewives and mothers. No one wants to send their husband or son off to a battlefield."

"...Nonetheless, that wasn't something I achieved on my own."

There were those that had been opposed to my proposal, of course. But His Highness and some other key figures who supported the proposal suppressed the opposition, thereby indebting the Maldurans to us while also displaying Sauslind's humanitarianism to surrounding countries. Our accomplishment was also thanks in part to the meteorologists and others who cooperated to see it through, as well as the memorandum and book upon which our prediction of the climate disaster had been based.

"You're the one who started it all," the prince said in a voice as quiet as the winds that buffet the base of Mt. Jifu (a simile I read in *The Travels of Parco Molo*).

Somehow I managed to think up a rebuttal. "But spreading the Suiran weave among high society was not my work."

"But you *are* the one who began its resurgence."

I was at a loss for words. After the climate incident, I read an old account of a traveling tradesman which had a rare mention of a now-forgotten textile. He spoke of how long ago, paper wasn't as widely used as it is today, so there was a custom of recording current events at the time onto fabrics. Curious as to what kind of fabric this could be, I used my connections and put in a request with an artisan after speaking with them about the details of the technique. The end result of this venture was the Suiran weave.

Still, the one who—

"Well, admittedly the true source for its renewed popularity was Countess Storrev and her daughters," the prince spoke amusedly, making my expression all the more pitiful for it.

My deceased mother was from the Storrev family. Her younger sister, my aunt, had taken a groom who then succeeded the family title in place of the eldest son who had died young. This was the same aunt who had injured her hip a few days prior and forced me to read romance novels at length for her.

My aunt had three daughters that were all very rambunctious—or rather, to put it politely, very lively and heavily into fashion. My luck ran out the moment they spotted the completed Suiran weave I had delivered. They swiped it out of my hands before I could say anything with strange proclamations of, "We'll spread this among the nobles!" Then in the blink of an eye, its popularity soared, which later resulted in written protests mixed with despair from the weavers in the marquess's territory.

The prince chuckled teasingly. "Your family is just protecting you. They're making sure no harm comes to your good reputation among the nobles."

I fell silent for a moment. It was true that my aunt and cousins had fussed over me since my mother passed away when I was young.

“At any rate...” I continued, “The accomplishment of seeing through the Zelger counterfeit belongs to my brother, not me.”

Once again I tried to rebut the prince’s argument, but as usual he simply smiled and said, “But it was you who first noticed something was strange about it.”

This all happened about a month ago.

I had just come from the archives and entered His Highness’s office to discover the prince and Lord Alexei with subdued looks on their faces as they stood around a piece of porcelain. Soon I, too, found myself staring at it.

When His Highness noticed my presence, he was gracious enough to explain, “It appears Zelger has been found.” Zelger was a rare piece of porcelain, said to be the royal family’s hidden treasure.

I regarded it at length with curiosity. “Hmm,” I whispered to myself as I tilted my head to the side. “Has it already been appraised?”

“Yes, the appraisal report was included with it,” answered Lord Alexei. “Is there something amiss?”

I furrowed my brow at his reply. There was something off about it, but surely if the appraisal report had been included with it, there could be no mistake about its authenticity. Still, somehow I just couldn’t shake my suspicions.

“Elianna?”

At Prince Christopher’s prompting, I glanced back into his blue eyes, and it was as if my doubts solidified. “I believe it’s a counterfeit,” I said, then stepped toward the two surprised men and bent down to inspect the item in question. I held my hand—the one that wasn’t currently holding books—up over the porcelain to cast a shadow against it, confirming what I already suspected.

“The reason Zelger is regarded as the royal family’s hidden treasure,” I explained, “is because, according to an artbook, it boasts a color known as ‘Zelger Blue,’ a hue born from a unique mixture of colors and minerals no longer present in the modern era. ‘Zelger’ itself is an ancient word meaning ‘dawn.’ In other words, ‘Zelger Blue’ refers to the azure color of the sky at dawn... By all appearances, this one here looks like a simple, flat shade of blue.”

“You’re certain?” Lord Alexei asked, the tension visible on his face.

I shrank back, unconfident. “My knowledge on artifacts and antiques is limited, so I cannot guarantee... My brother might be able to make a more definitive assessment.”

Alfred was quite knowledgeable when it came to fine arts (or rather, its literature). So I told them he might be more knowledgeable about Zelger than me. They immediately called him in to examine the

item, and the first thing to come out of his mouth was—

“It’s a counterfeit.” He spoke without a shadow of a doubt. Alfred pointed out clearly (and in more detail than I had) exactly what was off about the piece, such as the design.

His Highness slumped back in his chair. With a hand on his forehead and a face taut with a mix of emotions, he sighed. “It’s a blessing that we discovered it before it was publicly appraised by the royal treasury’s inspector. Otherwise Earl Casull would have taken the fall for it.”

Alfred’s brow quirked in response, but the prince cut the conversation short by saying, “Please keep this under wraps for now.” After that, Lord Glen was brought in and they proceeded to talk in private with heavy looks on their faces, so I wasn’t involved any further. And for some reason that conversation was what led to the whole incident with the viscount and his daughter.

Final Act: And Then There Were Two

My expression had remained miserable the entire time, and His Highness gave a puzzling laugh. “I, myself, was agonizing over how I could possibly get these nobles—ones who were only interested in outward appearances, who were too preoccupied with political power struggles to think of anything else—to accept you,” he said with a great big grin on his face that (pardon me for saying so) gave no indication he’d felt distressed at all.

“After all,” he continued, “you Bernsteins were content with your weakened status, as always, and completely indifferent to the politically ambitious houses looking down on you. How was I supposed to suddenly change people’s opinion? But then you demonstrated your worth all by yourself. There wasn’t even any need for me to weave together any elaborate plans.”

What on earth was he talking about...?

His Highness also tilted his head slightly. “We just talked about it, didn’t we? You silenced all of them—the court nobility, the government officials, the ladies of high society—all with your own power. And you went even further. You raised your reputation as the Bibliophile Princess to soaring heights among Sauslind’s citizens.” He went on, “Now you’re known as a princess with foresight, for your ability to avoid war and produce fashion, and also as an affectionate noble with keen insight into the common people’s daily lives.”

...Your Highness, of whom do you speak? Affectionate, me? The woman referred to as the “Library Ghost”? And keen insight? Are you referring to my gluttonous interest in sami cuisine?

There must be some mistake here, I thought, drawing away from

him.

His Highness merely smiled and closed the gap between us. “I never dreamed you’d solidify your position all by yourself. That made me happy, Eli. It meant you wanted to stand beside me as well.”

“Pardon...?!” My true feelings slipped out. I panicked, flustered, but the prince’s dazzling smile closed in, and it was then that the realization hit me. “Your Highness.” I gazed back firmly into those blue eyes of his, prepared for our heads to bump if he dared encroach any further. “Please stop obfuscating the matter.”

“...Tsk.” I could hear the click of his tongue, even as he averted his eyes. Something was different about him today. I felt as if I were seeing a completely new side of him.

Once I thought it over, I realized something was afoot. I’d certainly given advice and accomplished a number of things, but for word to spread at such a grand scale, and for it to become so exaggerated that people mistook those events as my personal achievements, required information manipulation. The matter with Earl Casull was a good example. It was also clear from the course of our conversation that only one person stood to benefit from instigating it.

His Highness ran a hand through his dazzling blond hair, expelling a quiet sigh. “Very well, I will admit to sticking my hand in to improve your reputation a bit. But even without my help, you were doing enough on your own to earn the people’s approval. Or do you doubt that?”

I lost my ground when he turned his eyes straight back at me. “Your Highness... Why would you go to such lengths?”

The name “Sauslind’s Brain” still weighed heavily upon me. Had the prince accepted such troublesome conditions just so he could obtain me for that name? Feeling gloomy, I cast my eyes down, but His Highness put a hand to my cheek and lifted my face back up. His fingers pressed firmly against my skin, his gaze intense.

“Eli, I already told you, didn’t I? I didn’t pick you because of the Bernsteins’ hidden name.”

I saw my own eyes reflected in his—saw them waver, hesitating.

The prince’s sigh, though soft, seemed to drown out my anxiety. “Then again...I already know you don’t remember.”

My head filled with doubt, but the prince kindly smiled as he explained that the two of us had met once before, almost ten years ago.

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The prince had been raised with special care as the heir to Sauslind, and thanks to being naturally gifted as well, he was the

picture of a conceited, domineering prepubescent. One day, he was in the royal library and in a foul mood, so he began taking out his anger on the books. He punched them, kicked them, and used them as target practice—

“Eli! Don’t get angry at me again. You already scolded me plenty back then!”

Come now, Your Highness. You needn’t get so flustered. If you have seen your ways, that’s enough for me. Oh dear, what are you breaking into a cold sweat for? No need to act so dramatic.

“Anyways...”

Back then, a girl younger than His Highness had slapped him across the face.

Well, that certainly does require some courage, but how disrespectful, I thought.

The girl was possessed with such intensity that even His Highness was speechless as she admonished him. “Apologize to the books!” Somehow he managed to regain his composure, but the moment he tried to object, she said, “It matters not who you are or where you’re from. These are the books of our ancestors, of people who can no longer speak to us anymore. Were you not taught that it’s inappropriate to commit injustice against those without a voice?”

“Y-You’re being way too dramatic,” the young prince said. “They’re just books.”

After a pause, the girl asked, “How old are you?”

“What? I-I’m twelve.”

“These books you were punching are history books written a hundred or more years ago, yet even now they continue to be reprinted. Before these ancient tomes, your twelve years makes you nothing more than an infant in diapers—a freshly hatched chick that still hasn’t fully escaped its shell. Now apologize to our great ancestors!”

Those words, coming from a girl who was younger than him, overwhelmed His Highness. His pride, ballooned from years of baseless praise on his wit and intelligence, crumbled, and he expressed remorse for his actions and apologized.

He became interested in the girl after that and started visiting the royal library to hear her talk about books. The content she shared from the tomes she read differed completely from what his instructor had taught him. It didn’t take long for the boy’s heart to flutter with joy, not for the books but for the girl who spoke of them. That was why, after looking into the girl’s background, he went to consult his father and the prime minister, wanting to keep the girl at his side.

“Father and the prime minister suddenly started panicking,” the prince shared, staring vacantly into the distance for some reason.

I had to ask. “Was she that esteemed of a person? Had the princess of another kingdom somehow snuck into our own?”

“Eli.” The prince’s gaze was lukewarm for some reason. “I’m talking about *our* past together right now.”

I blinked in surprise.

Oh... Don’t tell me that girl was actually me?

The prince let out an audible, breathy sigh. His blue eyes lacked their usual intensity. “I can’t believe I have shared this much and you still don’t remember... Well, no. I must have left an absolutely awful impression, so maybe I should count my blessings that you don’t recall.”

Please, Your Highness, don’t lose heart. After all, I have the memory of a goldfish when it comes to people.

His Highness massaged his temples, as if smoothing out the wrinkle between his brows, and continued the story.

That was the first time he learned of the hidden Sauslind name associated with the Bernsteins (and by extension, me). He was then warned by His Majesty and the prime minister that it would be difficult to draw me into the royal family, given that the Bernsteins weren’t swayed by power. Moreover, because of our hidden name, they advised him to avoid making any demands that might upset our family.

The prince refused to heed their warnings and tried to approach my father, the marquess, indirectly. But the very next day, I was sent back to our territory where my grandfather had holed himself up.

“Oh goodness...”

That was enough to finally stir my recollection. I remembered now that after my father lost my mother, he fell so deep into depression that he completely ignored books and refused to let my brother or I leave his side. That was why I had memories of spending my youth in the capital before suddenly being sent back to our territory, alongside my brother, when I was nine. I didn’t step foot inside the capital again until my societal debut when I was fourteen.

The prince smiled bitterly, though I wasn’t sure why. “I really wish I could kick my younger self in the back of the head for being so foolish back then.”

Pardon, Your Highness, but I’m fairly certain that’s physically impossible.

“Well, anyhow, I appealed to the marquess and your grandfather numerous times only to be rebuffed. By the time you finally made your societal debut, you’d grown ridiculously cute, but you didn’t even remember me, *and* you were oblivious when other men tried to approach you!”

You’re scaring me, Your Highness. Please calm down. Also, you have

heard of the sayings, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” and, “Love is blind,” right? Not that I have a hobby of denigrating myself, and I do realize that sounds terribly disrespectful to the prince, but still I thought he was exaggerating.

Feeling even more restless than I did a moment ago, I drew away once more, but the prince captured me again in his steady blue eyes.

“I mean it, you lack any self-awareness whatsoever. There was one time an ambassador from another country tried to persuade you to go back with him to his country, but you were completely clueless. Do you know how mad you drove me with worry...?! Please, be a little more conscious of the fact that your appearance draws people’s interest.”

“Um... Are you trying to tell me that—and I’m not sure I believe you—I, the Library Ghost, am actually quite popular with people?”

His blue eyes, deep with emotion, darkened. I felt a tremor run through me. “Eli, whether you’re a library ghost or as dense as those books you love to read, my feelings for you won’t change. But maybe I need to drive the point home. After almost ten years of waiting, I’ve finally caught you. After all of that, no matter what happens now, I’m not going to let go of you. Okay?”

I flushed red and tried to pull away, but since my hand was still trapped in his, I could only arch back. His explanation was so frank and candid that even someone as thick-headed as me understood now that it was me he truly desired, not the hidden name of the Bernsteins. And yet, even so...

“B-But, Your Highness, I haven’t undertaken the necessary princess training.”

He stared blankly, blinking, his face screwed up as if he couldn’t believe what he’d just heard. Beneath his breath he murmured, “I never would have guessed you would worry about that type of thing.”

You might want to speak a bit more softly if you don’t want me to hear, Your Highness.

“You haven’t taken the training,” he agreed, “but you have passed the exam. Thus it was decided you don’t require the training.”

Excuse me, what now...?

“When you first became my fiancée, you attended a tea party with my mother and the court ladies and underwent their interrogation, remember? That’s where they confirmed that your knowledge, education, manners and...well, social skills we’ll leave aside...but they found nothing wrong with your appearance or disposition.”

“I-I’ve never heard anything of this...”

“Yeah, because I didn’t say anything.” And then he added, “I figured you would run off if I did.”

I realized then that the dazzling smile on his face was actually a

devil's smile. And as he approached, I wondered if there was any way for me to escape.

"I'm not exactly skilled at navigating high society," I said. That was an absolute necessity for a queen.

Also, Your Highness, please stop kissing my hand. When you do, my heart pounds so hard it feels as if it might burst right out of my chest.

"My mother isn't skilled at diplomacy."

Pardon?

He explained, "She's not good with the culture, values, or languages of other countries, that kind of thing. Whenever honored guests come to visit, she always calls you to stay at the palace, doesn't she?" Then he added, "Because you're extremely proficient in those areas."

Now that he mentions it, I thought, recalling. It happened so frequently I'd begun to think it was just my role as the crowned prince's betrothed. Foreign language was a natural area of study if you wanted to read books in their native tongue. There were translations, of course, but written in its native language, a book carried subtle turns of phrase and nuances consistent with its culture.

"Hey, Eli." His Highness took a quiet breath and, with a warm smile still plastered on his face, gently said, "Perfection may be demanded from you for your elevated status, but you're only human. Humans have strengths and weaknesses. Fortunately, you and I have people around us to help compensate for ours. But more than anything, I want you to be by my side from now on. Do you not wish for the same?"

My heart throbbed more fiercely than it ever had before.

The prince's eyes, blue and clear as a cloudless sky, captured me and drew me in. It was as if all the pain I'd carried with me up until this morning was being washed away. So desperately had I wanted to be by his side, but so sure was I that it would be impossible. It had been excruciating and lonely, beyond my ability to cope.

"Can I really...stay at your side?" I asked.

Prince Christopher beamed happily. "Eli. Elianna. The only person I have ever wished—*will* ever wish—to be at my side is you."

I felt as if I were floating on air the way my heart thrummed, a smile naturally forming on my face. "For the first time I realized that there's a world out there that I can't understand through books alone."

The prince chuckled and cupped his hand around my cheek. Those blue eyes of his grew larger and larger as he leaned in. And just before he reached my lips, he whispered, voice full of affection, "My dear, sweet Bibliophile Princess."



Arc 2: The Men Behind the Stage

It certainly took me by surprise the first time I saw her.

Her hair was so light it was almost silver. The pale hue colored her in such a way that she almost seemed to melt into the background, but at the same time, it gave her an aura of mystery that highlighted her adorable features. Her eyes were an aqua gray surrounded by smokey eyelashes, and her face had a button nose and tiny lips. That, along with her pale white skin and dainty limbs, made her look like a porcelain doll.

That was my (Alexei Strasser's) first impression.

Frankly, it was unexpected. I couldn't believe this extremely sheltered noble lady was a Bernstein, also known as Sauslind's Brain. Unfortunately, I had very little memory of her societal debut. The only thing I did remember clearly was that Prince Christopher, this country's heir to the throne and my cousin and childhood friend, had lost his calm demeanor at the time. I was well aware of the fact that he'd had his heart set on this girl since long ago. When she was elevated to the status of the prince's betrothed just one month after her debut, it wasn't surprise I felt but rather exasperation—no, not even that; I applauded his skill. I only wished he would show the same zeal toward government affairs.

Not long after Lady Elianna's engagement to the prince, I returned home only to be ambushed by my exultant younger sister, Therese. "Alexei!"

No need to shout, I can hear you just fine. More importantly, as the daughter of an earl you should be more discreet about your emotions, whether you're engaging with family or not.

"Oh, come on! You're glowering again. This is exactly why you have those persistent migraines."

Wonderful. Now enlighten me, who do you think might be one of the contributing causes to said headaches?

"Never mind that, I have something to tell you! You know the queen conducted a tea party today, right? This was the first time since the engagement ceremony that I got to see Lady Elianna, and..."

Ah yes, now that she mentioned it, there had been a ceremony for their engagement.

Therese had just turned fifteen this year. She had the same black hair as me, with the same bright auburn eyes as our father. My bias as

a family member aside, Therese had a dignified beauty about her. Given how close she was in age to Prince Christopher and her noble status, she had been first on the list of possible marriage candidates to His Highness prior to Lady Elianna's appearance. An option, I should note, that had gone unconsidered on account of the two being too closely related, since our mother was the older sister of the sitting monarch.

The palace naturally erupted with excitement at their engagement; finally it was clear why the prince had remained so non-committal about choosing a partner until now. My younger sister and the other young ladies who had been considered as possible marriage candidates must have also been abuzz.

As I realized that it must have been those same candidates who were invited to the tea party today, my sister's face suddenly flushed and she began to tremble. I grew suspicious, but just as quickly she burst out with laughter, unable to hold it in.

Therese, I believe we need to discuss doubling the time you spend with your etiquette teacher as of tomorrow.

"Alexei, knock it off with the sinister looks. You look like one of the devil's wicked henchmen."

How impertinent.

Having soothed her fit of giggles, my sister began to elaborate at my prompting. At the tea party, all of the tables around Lady Elianna had been packed full of noble ladies, all previous candidates for marriage to the prince. Before the party even started (although my sister swore she heard the gong proclaiming the commencement of the festivities first), they all immediately began to launch an attack on the prince's new fiancée.

Insults such as, "She may be the daughter of a marquess, but she certainly is brazen for such low-ranking nobility," and, "That gold digger doesn't seem to understand her place," and, "She may look docile, but I wonder how many men she's seduced before? Almost like a poisonous insect making its nest in the palace. She may be nothing more than a larva right now, but just you wait..." They laughed together, "Hohoho," until Lady Elianna opened her mouth.

"The larva period has already passed."

"What?" one of the ladies blurted, blinking furiously as if she must've misheard.

Lady Elianna explained matter-of-factly, "We have already entered the period where foliage begins to grow thick, so the larvae of poisonous insects should be pupae by now. Another couple of weeks and they should reach adulthood and begin hovering around the outside light. Now what you should be careful of is the approaching breeding period and the subspecies that coat their eggs in poison to

defend against outside threats.”

“Excuse me...?” The lady beside her spoke, so shocked she forgot to hold her fan in front of her mouth.

“Adults of those species will attach poison needle-like hairs to their eggs, and some of these can be dangerous to touch. Poisonous insects primarily lay their eggs in roses,” Lady Elianna said, her eyes drifting to the hair of the girl who had most haughtily ridiculed her. Whether the glance was purposeful or mere coincidence, none could say, but the girl did screech and rip out the beautiful rose that had been nestled in her hair. She then blanched as she imagined that the very flower she’d placed in her hair might be host to an insect’s eggs.

Lady Elianna seemed entirely unperturbed as she continued. “That’s why, as soon as the larvae of those poison insects have hatched, they are coated in poisonous hairs and group together to hibernate. In case you’re wondering, we collectively call the species of caterpillars with fur ‘hairy caterpillars.’ There are poisonous and non-poisonous subsets among them. Meanwhile, those without hair are simply called ‘caterpillars.’”

From there, Lady Elianna proceeded to talk about the ecology of hairy (and hairless) caterpillars in fine detail. Finally, as she launched into how there was a tribe living in the southern islands with a custom of feasting on the larvae in the trees, the ladies cried out, “That’s enough!”

The noble ladies occupying the surrounding tables looked utterly miserable. One of them, who had specifically had her hair meticulously groomed for the occasion, looked like a shadow of her once glorious self, now disheveled and haggard looking. Half of the ladies were blue in the face, desperately fighting back nausea, while the other half were crying, begging Lady Elianna through their tears to stop speaking.

“...”

Even I was at a loss for words. And equally concerned about my sister, who gleefully declared, “It was a master play, Alexei!”

She continued, “Once the party was over, I spoke with Lady Elianna.”

Therese praised her sincerely, saying, “That was splendid work. Not only did you crush those former candidates directly, but you even bested the queen who intentionally gathered them all together today.”

Lady Elianna tilted her head to the side as if she had no idea what Therese was referring to, so my younger sister subtly prompted Lady Elianna for her own interpretation of what had just happened.

“They all seemed so interested in insects, so I thought I would share some information with them,” she answered earnestly. The way she spoke, as if she honestly believed what she was saying, only

further stoked Therese's interest.

"She really doesn't pick up on any malice from other people. But it doesn't appear that she's impervious to human emotion either. She's most intriguing. Please, let me meet her again." The way Therese leaned toward me expectantly, her eyes alight, just contributed further to the throbbing in my head.

There was still much I didn't know yet about Lady Elianna's disposition. Allowing a noble lady like her, who created such a commotion without compunction, to meet with my sister, who was all too thrilled by the resulting chaos, would be sheer stupidity. I didn't want to imagine the mischief they might cause.

I curtly rebuffed her request, only for her to turn glum and mutter under her breath, "Fine. I heard Lady Elianna is close with the three Storrev sisters. I can go through them instead."

I decided then I would recommend to our parents that Therese be locked inside the house with her tutor for the time being.

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There was another instance as well.

Glen was casually bringing up the topic of the Hero King and how he'd slayed a dragon to Lady Elianna, when she said, "Oh, you mean the thief story."

"Th-Thief story?"

It was an action-adventure tale, one that all men of Sauslind read with reverence in their boyhood. For a moment Glen had a dumbfounded look on his face, as if he'd misheard what she said, but Lady Elianna just nodded at him.

"Long ago, humans encroached upon a dragon that had been living quietly and peacefully. When they told the dragon that they wanted his bountiful land for themselves and that he had to leave, the enraged dragon blew fire at them. That's when the thief, who claimed himself a hero, appeared and began harassing the blameless dragon, driving him away. Then the thief stole the treasure the dragon had been so carefully guarding and bragged, 'What was once yours now belongs to me! Everything belongs to me!' That's the story you're referring to, yes?"

Alas, the heart of the little boy within Glen cracked and shattered, loud enough that even I could hear it.

Your Highness, I know you're desperately trying to hide your laughter by turning your head away, but I can see the vibration in your shoulders as your hands cradle your stomach, I thought.

I had already surmised that Lady Elianna was outside the norm based on my sister's story, but this served to confirm as much. According to the prince, the reason Lady Elianna's etiquette was

beyond reproach was solely because she wanted to avoid any actions that would get her scolded and sent to lessons, which would then cut into her reading time.

While I did wonder about her warped sense of values, I was also surprised by the fact that she read everything she could get her hands on, from cover to cover. No doubt thanks to the Bernstein blood running through her.

As a test, I tried having her assist me with document sorting, only to discover that she was more competent than my halfwit assistant. She could instantly provide me the relevant materials when I was handling a particular matter, on top of supplemental ones that provided an alternate viewpoint for me to consider. She was also precise when it came to summarizing written statements and concentrating them down to key points. Her arm strength (impressive and yet unnatural for a noble lady) was also convenient. If it weren't for her being the prince's betrothed, I would have liked to install her as one of my subordinates, but alas...His Highness already glared at me fiercely whenever I enlisted her help, so that was a lost cause.

Still, I often found myself skeptical, wondering, *Are you really sure this is the one, Your Highness?* Her face, normally as still as a porcelain doll's, came to life when she was reading a book. But this young lady, at whom the prince gazed so adoringly, was blushing as she read a book titled (and I kid you not), *The Ecology of the Jungle's Wild Animals*. I would like someone to explain to me what section of that book could possibly make a young noble lady's eyes glisten and cheeks heat up.

I sighed at the most recent contributing cause for my headaches and recalled (again) the mutterings of the archive staff as they exchanged bewildered looks.

"We've really gotten some strange books in here recently," they'd said.

I put my hand to my forehead, knowing Lady Elianna had a hand (albeit indirect) in this latest development.

Not long ago, Lady Elianna's elder brother and my dear friend, Alfred, came to me secretly to consult me, claiming his sister had said something incredible.

"Alfred, when must I return these adornments the royal family lent me?" she had asked.

I was shocked when I heard. Basically, she had mistook all the gifts that the prince had bestowed upon her since the beginning of their engagement as merely being lent to her to elevate her appearance.

I gave Alfred a skeptical look as if to say, "Surely you jest," but

the meek Alfred had a troubled expression on his face as he shook his head. "It's the truth," he said.

That instance was more astonishing than it was headache-inducing. Her obliviousness was a problem, to be sure, but I was still in disbelief. Both at how little awareness she had of His Highness despite him sending those gifts under his own name, and at how epically he had failed to capitalize on his reputation as Sauslind's handsome prince when it came to her. Now rather than cradling my head, I wanted to pinch the inner corners of my eyes instead.

"Ah...my sister is, uh, a bit too literal, I guess you could say... Or, well, serious."

It was that very aspect of her personality that was capable of morphing the prince's office into a devil's lair.

I glanced grudgingly back at my friend. No doubt it would depress His Highness if he caught word of this, or worse yet, if she really did try to return one of his gifts. But worse than that, he would undoubtedly go into a frenzy, the likes of which no one had ever seen before. The first victim would be Glen, that much was obvious, but he was just an unfortunate casualty. More than that, I feared I might be pulled in.

"Ahem, yes, so that's why I thought we should take some preventative measures," Alfred said with a bitter smile, trying to quell the intensity of my glare.

I gave him an annoyed look. I already knew that deep down, Alfred was just like his father, Marquess Bernstein. He wasn't entirely behind the idea of his precious little sister becoming the crown princess. In fact, I had asked him how he felt about the prince's actions once before.

"Hmm. As a fellow man, part of me would like to support his efforts, but it's going to be an uphill battle for him since the woman he's trying to win over is Eli. It will take a while. If he doesn't give up and actually manages to turn her attention toward him, I would be happy to give them my blessing," he said with a smile, revealing a more calculating side.

Now it was crystal clear exactly why he had said it would be an "uphill battle" at the time. I never dreamed I would get caught up in the mess as well.

At any rate, I consulted with Alfred, and we decided Lady Elianna would keep the gifts and continue to use them, and at the same time, I would restrain the prince from his aggressive present barrage. I selected a day when the prince seemed to be in good spirits, cleared my throat once, and nonchalantly insisted on a hold on the adornments he'd newly arranged for. The prince must have realized what was going on, because he was unusually defensive and had a

disheartened look on his face.

“I know that Eli isn’t the type to get excited about dresses and jewels, but these are all gifts I bought with my private funds. I don’t want to be thought of as a crude man who can’t even send his beloved adornments.”

Though lauded as a wise and great man with a kingly disposition despite his youth, the prince was ultimately still just an inexperienced boy. It was only natural for him to prioritize his own desires sometimes.

I breathed a sigh and found myself offering advice that was very contrary to my nature. “The value of a present is in its ability to delight the person receiving it. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Indignant, the prince furrowed his brows and fell silent.

The aggressive gifting seemed to cease after that, but in exchange, the royal archive had a sudden influx of bizarre tomes. No doubt because Lady Elianna would frequent the palace if it possessed books that drew her interest.

Thus a new contributing factor to my headaches appeared—concern whether this sudden surplus of books would cause people to suspect that the royal archive was abusing its power to obtain them, unaware of the truth behind it.

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Those adornments, however, also became the catalyst for another incident.

It was about one year after Lady Elianna was engaged to the prince, at a customary dance held by the royal family. The well-dressed Lady Elianna had shed the unsophisticated manners associated with countryside nobility, having been surrounded by ladies of the court for the past year, and was now the polished, refined fiancée to the prince. As I recall, she was wearing a light-colored dress that day, with delicate lace frills, making for an adorable and age-appropriate outfit for a noble lady.

This is off-topic, but up until that point, she had always worn dark colors with white lace at the hem. However, as soon as she switched to adorning herself in lighter colored dresses that matched the shade of her hair, with dark lace at the hem, that style grew popular among the other young noble ladies. The older, conservative crowd drew their brows at the “impropriety” of it, but it caught on with the noblewomen who were awed at how the new color scheme highlighted the paleness of their skin.

Judging by what I heard from Therese, however... “Most of Lady Elianna’s clothing is made with the same color pattern. Apparently that’s because the cuffs get dirty while she’s reading her books.”

For the same reason, she preferred dresses without gaudy designs and unnecessarily heavy adornments, which was why Glen and others were prattling on about how, “Lately those married noblewomen’s dresses have been so easy to take off. It’s been a real lifesaver.” The man had best watch his back, for I suspected he had bigger problems to worry about than being the prince’s punching bag.

Anyway, enough of that.

On that particular day, Lady Elianna looked like a promising bud about to bloom. She had a faint scent of innocence about her that drew everyone’s attention. Part of her splendor was owed to the adornment at her breast, a magnificent sapphire twinkling like an evening star. One that shone so brilliantly that it stood out even amidst the sparkling maelstrom that was the evening party.

The sender of this exquisite gift was none other than the prince himself, whose eyes were the very same color. He seemed to be in high spirits, spinning his princess-to-be around more times than necessary when they danced. With each twirl, the sapphire glimmered in the light, making Lady Elianna’s innocent appearance all the more prominent. Her expression looked unusually soft as well, her aqua gray eyes shimmering as she enjoyed her conversation with His Highness.

To an observer, the two looked harmoniously well-suited to one another. I, however, knew better. Yesterday she happened across a tome she’d been wanting to read, and it continued to attract her interest even now. Her conversation with the prince was undoubtedly wholly devoted to that book.

As I tried to mask the headache I felt, I suddenly noticed a man whose eyes were taken with Lady Elianna. He was a new ambassador from the Miseral Dukedom, a southwestern maritime territory. Previously the post had been occupied by an older, more mild-mannered gentleman. This new ambassador, the same age as Prince Theodore, was sociable and overflowing with ambition.

I had a bad feeling about him. He’d only been appointed just a few days prior and had, I suspected, already seen Lady Elianna before—when she’d sat in on his talks with the queen. Neither His Highness nor I were present for said meeting, so I wasn’t privy to the details, but Alan reported that the man seemed to have taken an interest in her.

Please just abstain from doing anything that might rouse the demon lord from his slumber, I urgently prayed.

Unfortunately, not a single word of that prayer seemed to reach the gods. Was I being cursed for not showing more piety on a regular basis?

“Lady Elianna. This is a confectionery made from muscovado, an import from the southern continent. It’s popular with young ladies in my home country right now.”

The delicately baked sweets he produced earned him a hum of acknowledgment from Lady Elianna, who blinked her eyes in confusion. Both of them were in the break room of the royal archives. According to Alan’s report, the man had readily attended every evening party and tea party just as other guests of honor did, but he’d grown impatient when his target failed to appear there. Per Lady Elianna’s agreement with His Highness, she would not engage in high society any more than was necessary. Thus, the ambassador changed his tactics and made his appearance at the royal archives instead. His target, of course, was Lady Elianna.

As my head began to prickle with pain, I glimpsed Prince Theodore in front of me, flipping through his book catalog as if the matter didn’t concern him. I had only come to the archives to retrieve some documents when he suddenly dragged me to the break room saying, “You’ll get to see something interesting if you come, I assure you.” Now he had the audacity to act nonchalant despite his premeditated crime—which I call thusly because he was now leaving it up to me to settle the matter.

“Please, go on and have a taste, Lady Elianna. I would love to hear your impressions directly,” said the ambassador.

I let out a breathy sigh. Apparently this ambassador had zeroed in on the lady’s extensive knowledge since their previous encounter. I’d heard something about him receiving beneficial advice when he attended those talks with the queen on how to handle some of his country’s domestic matters. The man had a good eye, but his methods for drawing a lady’s interest were too rooted in stereotypes.

Before I could open my mouth, someone—who had entered the room without my notice—passed by me and plucked one of the sweets up from the table. “Black Pearl’s Tear. It looks delicious, Lord Effingham. I don’t suppose you mind if I try one?” It was Prince Christopher, with his dazzling blonde hair and a lovely smile plastered on his face.

The ambassador was surprised at the crown prince’s sudden entrance, but he quickly regained his composure and said, “Please feel free to have as many as you like, Your Highness.”

The prince gave a generous nod. “Elianna,” he said, drawing her attention as he bit off one half of the sweet, smoothly pressing the remaining half past her lips.

“...?!” Lady Elianna’s eyes went wide with surprise, her mouth ajar just enough for the treat to slip right in. The prince watched as her eyes darted back and forth, conflicted and confused. He licked

mischievously at his fingertips, which had just grazed her mouth, his concept of manners and etiquette completely forgotten. It was enough to make anyone watching nauseous.

Regardless of whether that's your method of intercepting the opposition or not, please reserve such displays for when it's just the two of you, Your Highness, I thought.

Lady Elianna's eyes were still round with shock, but as she chewed the treat inside her mouth, her face colored with emotion.

"...L-Lady Elianna?" asked the ambassador, voice strained with confusion.

The look on her face was very clearly a vivid response, not to the prince's actions, but to her feelings about the confection. The problem wasn't with the Black Pearl's Tear, an exotic treat beloved even by the young ladies of Sauslind as well. The problem was with the person eating it.

"Are you all right, Elianna?" the prince asked. The calculating culprit, Prince Christopher, ordered a maid to replace the tea. Lady Elianna hurriedly cleansed her mouth with it.

The ambassador had a gobsmacked look on his face, an emotion I understood well. There were three key items to earning a lady's goodwill: dresses, jewels, and sweets. And Lady Elianna had just flipped the latter on its head. I, too, had been shocked when I first witnessed her revulsion.

Prince Theodore was currently stifling a small chuckle, but just one year ago I could recall him having the same dumbfounded look on his face.

"My apologies... I have an aversion to sweets." Lady Elianna, contrary to her appearance, was not a fan of sugary delights. But was she the real one at fault here, or was it the man who'd cunningly slipped into the seat beside her, hiding his demon lord persona behind a beautiful exterior?

In fact, Your Highness, your office should be overflowing with paperwork awaiting your approval. What are you dawdling here for? If you have time to smile dryly and glower at this ambassador who has been going to all sorts of lengths to win over Lady Elianna, then I would appreciate it if you'd turn your attention back to government affairs.

"This confection, it's called a Black Pearl's Tear?" Lady Elianna asked. Her show of interest drew a look of surprise from Prince Theodore.

Color returned to the ambassador's face. "Yes, our confectioners labored greatly and spent many hours researching to create it. Originally it was created to spread the word about muscovado, which had just been discovered last year, but lately the treat itself has been growing more famous than the ingredient used to make it." Now that

he'd recomposed himself, the ambassador started babbling.

"If you'd like," he began to say, his refined face breaking into an inviting smile, "I could send to have a real black pearl brought in for you, my lady. While I am sure the soft color of an ordinary pearl would suit you well, the precious shade of a black pearl would highlight your beauty more." At the end I was fairly sure I heard him mumble provocatively, "More than a sapphire."

Dread seized me.

Within Sauslind, not a single man approached Lady Elianna. This was due in part to her being the prince's betrothed, but also in part because Prince Christopher's beaming smile and cold gaze warded off anyone who got close. Perhaps the ambassador deserved praise for having the gall to oppose the prince, but I rather wished he would refrain, given how his provocation had only made the prince's terrifying smile grow wider.

"Elianna," said the prince. "I think the gem of the ocean—the mermaid's stone—would suit you better than a black pearl. It matches your eyes, and considering what the future holds, it seems all the more appropriate. Shall I have one prepared for you?"

The prince's meaningful suggestion of the mermaid stone likely referred to aquamarine. I'd heard it was beloved by young women because of the meaning it carried: a happy marriage.

Oblivious to the antagonistic glances being traded beside her, Lady Elianna simply replied, "No, thank you." The prince's shoulders instantly fell. Her interest remained focused on the confections on the table. "A black pearl appeared in a story I read before known as *The Legend of Kalee*. The book is actually a collection of tales about the gods and goddesses revered by the southern continent's tribes. It was written there that the jewel known as the Black Pearl's Tear is the personification of Kahina, a goddess worshiped by the coastal Mawatai Tribe."

"Aha. Well, then perhaps the confectioners knew the legend and that's why they gave it that name." While the ambassador responded coolly, both His Highness and Prince Theodore turned pensive. I, too, began to suspect that this was valuable information.

Rampaging pirates had been the cause of recent problems with the trade routes in the southern seas. The pain of this troublesome situation should've been equally felt by the Miseral Dukedom, but they'd come up with their own personal trick to minimize the damage. However, it was possible that by using the rare black pearls mined in their region, they could strike up a deal with the southern tribes, further reducing the raiders' influence. The coastal tribes had certainly been victims as well, so with the cooperation of both continents, perhaps we could find an effective countermeasure against the pirates.

“Lord Effingham. I have a proposal regarding trade with your country. I would love to discuss it with you in a separate room.” It was clear that His Highness’s intention with this idea was to send the ambassador packing.

“But I...” the ambassador, still captivated by Lady Elianna, began to protest. I’d thought the man sensible at least, but evidently I had overestimated him if he didn’t even realize how the conversation just now could benefit trade with his country. “I would love to bestow a black pearl on Lady—”

Lady Elianna, the only one who didn’t seem to understand what was truly going on, rebuffed him as she had the prince a moment ago. “I am grateful for the offer but I must decline; your gift would be wasted on me.” Then she continued, “Besides... I have my sapphire.”

I knew immediately that the prince’s mood would take a boost from that. But why was it that I seemed to hear her clarify that it was a “borrowed” item? I would pray, for the sake of His Highness’s frame of mind, that it was simply my imagination.

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His Highness entrusted the ambassador of the Miseral Dukedom with the role of negotiator and sent him off, along with a few others, to the southern continent. Thus, a new ambassador was sent to us—a calm, older gentleman this time.

After that, Lady Elianna would give us the occasional glimpse into why her family was regarded as Sauslind’s Brain, impressing me in the process. The type of pen both His Highness and I were now using was one such example of that. The prince had slipped up during sword training and injured his wrist. When Lady Elianna saw how laboriously he struggled in writing out documents afterward, she presented him with a pen, the same one that would later spread in popularity. At first he had to practice since he was unused to that style of pen, but His Highness was a quick learner and it soon became his favorite. Usage of the pen then spread via (I suspected) the chamberlain, who had witnessed it all.

Another example was after the Maldura issue was solved. His Highness and I were discussing what should be done with extra money from the military defense budget when I suddenly thought to ask for Lady Elianna’s input. Unfortunately, the lady possessed the special ability to tune everyone out when she became deeply immersed in her reading. At one point, Glen even slipped and shattered a teacup right beside her, but she didn’t even flinch. I admired that level of concentration.

I tried to change the subject, realizing my timing may have been off, but His Highness called out to her. “Elianna?”

Her silvery lashes fluttered, and gradually her aqua gray eyes glanced up. Given the way she stared blankly and blinked, it was a mystery to me whether she'd actually heard her name being called or not.

His Highness smiled gently and drew her attention. "There's extra money left over from this year's military defense budget. What would you do with it, if it were up to you?"

Again she blinked several times at the sudden question, as if she still hadn't completely extricated herself from her reading trance.

It made sense now why one of the seven mysteries His Highness's lady maids spoke of was how strange it was that, even now, Lady Elianna didn't reciprocate his feelings. Yet the prince understood and even seemed a bit amused by her resistance to his charms. I just hoped his patience for her didn't run him out of time.

I let a sigh slip out and said in defeat, "I assume you will suggest we use that extra money to increase the number of schools."

Lady Elianna folded her book shut and tilted her head. "While I do agree it's important to raise the literacy rate among civilians..."

I figured the Bernsteins would put precedence upon that over anything else, but the hesitation in her voice made me second guess. When I pressed her to continue, she thought carefully before answering.

"For villages in the countryside struggling with poverty, having books or being able to read isn't going to turn any profit for them. Food for the day is more valuable than anything. Literacy isn't going to fill their stomachs."

"..."

Sausland was one of the most (relatively) stable and affluent countries on the Ars continent, but wealth disparity existed here just as it did everywhere else. It was all the more pronounced the further into the countryside you went. I didn't expect her to speak of it as if she'd seen it for herself. His Highness seemed just as surprised.

Lady Elianna ducked her head down slightly. "It was written about in Dan Edold's travel log."

The name left a bit of a bitter taste in my mouth. I'd developed an interest in Dan Edold since the incident with the Weimar Region and had checked out his book for myself. It was then that I understood why his travel log, which was written more like a report than a diary, hadn't made waves with the masses. That said, skills like his were difficult to come by. Thus, the Intelligence Bureau had tried soliciting him, but he'd turned them down flat, claiming it suited him better to write travel logs the way he wanted.

So I began to investigate. Who was publishing these travel logs that didn't sell at all? Who was financing him? Who was sending him

off on these trips to the hinterlands? In short, the reason he had refused a post at the Intelligence Bureau was because the Bernsteins had sniffed out his talent before we could and propositioned him, so he was already in their debt.

When I started to wonder just how many others the Bernsteins had similarly noticed before us and employed, my head began to throb. So instead I turned back to the conversation and said, "You mean we should use the extra money to bring relief to those villages?"

"Yes, that would be advisable as well," she said with a pause. "But first, I think you should leave it up to the regional lord to decide on budgetary allotments for that. For money from the national budget, I think you should use it on updating medical resources in the Krug Region."

"The Krug Region?" His Highness blurted out, as if he couldn't believe what he'd just heard.

The Krug Region was located at the foot of a northern mountain range. The area had no notable characteristics, was neither enriched nor impoverished, and rarely came up in conversation.

Lady Elianna nodded meekly. "According to *The Valley of Winter*, a regional survey from five years ago written by author Max Wise, the people there are deeply entrenched in their indigenous beliefs and values, which has made their society strongly male-dominated." She recoiled slightly upon realizing how intently we were listening but continued nonetheless. "So I looked into the matter.

"Compared to other regions, Krug has an overwhelmingly low birthrate. I suspect this is likely the influence of those native beliefs and values, not that I mean to sound as if I'm making a judgment call. Simply, I hear that childbirth is an enormous undertaking and health risk for women. Nurturing life and giving birth should not be something that equates to death.

"Resolving those deeply ingrained beliefs cannot be accomplished in a single day, but rather than standing by and doing nothing, Sauslind should demonstrate its will to the people. Indigenous beliefs or not, they are still people of this country, and if their survival is at stake, we must reach out the hand of mercy. All the more when you consider it is for the future children of our country."

I was inwardly impressed. It was this aspect of her that was most uncommon. She spoke of ideals and used fair reasoning, but she also kept her eyes on reality. I wondered how she'd learned to balance her way of thinking.

"You have been thinking about this for a while now, my lady?" Glen asked, similarly in awe.

Lady Elianna tilted her head slightly. "I'm not sure if I would go as far to say 'a while,' but at least since I read the Weimar Region's

community newsletter.”

“And?” the prince prompted, his lips breaking into a smile.

“I could tell by the newsletter that the women in the region were extremely healthy. The same goes for the short comment columns. If the wife of a townsman is energetically administering to the needs of her household, then her children will be in good health as well. And her husband can work diligently for his family’s sake. That’s what keeps morale there high and makes the entire region flourish.

“It was also women who came up with the idea of sami cuisine. Even among those women, there were some who couldn’t move when they were pregnant and those whose physical condition deteriorated after birth. I believe that supporting these women will lead to the revitalization of the region. I also think it ties in to the prosperity of the country as well.”

It felt as though I had been reminded, once again, why the Bernsteins were known as Sauslind’s Brain. Though her being a woman might have also been a contributing factor for her unique approach to the situation.

His Highness was similarly contemplative, carefully mulling over her input. After the prince thanked her for sharing, Lady Elianna seemed to sense the conversation was over and returned to her book. I sighed lightly, foreseeing an increase in work in the future.

Glen gazed admiringly at Lady Elianna, and even I couldn’t deny that I held a deep respect for her as well. However, there was one off-putting thing I would like to note. The title of the book she was reading, which had tickled her interest far more than our conversation, was *How to Distinguish Edible Grasses: Now You Too Can Live a Self-Sufficient Lifestyle!* Why in the world was the daughter of a marquess and fiancée to the crown prince interested in grass... No, that wasn’t the weird part, the self-sufficiency... No, okay, in the first place, who even ordered that kind of...

There was just too much for me to deconstruct there, and once again I felt my head throbbing.

Arc 3: Her and Her Prince's Treasure

Chapter 1: Roma Market

“...And the two lived happily ever after.” The woman’s soft voice was punctuated by a thump as she folded the book shut.

A child, who had been gazing down at the woman’s hands, their eyes alight, now peered up. “Mother. Does the ‘ever after’ part mean ‘forever’? No more sad things are going to happen to the princess or prince anymore?”

She smiled gently and cupped her hands warmly over the child’s cheeks. “That’s right. They may experience sadness and pain, but still the two will live together happily, forever.”

“How?”

“They are able to overcome difficult times by being together,” the mother said.

The child’s bottom lip protruded in a pout as if they didn’t understand. “But the prince didn’t come to the princess’s rescue. And the princess didn’t try to run away. The ones who saved her were the animals and the wizard.”

“True,” came a reply accompanied by warm laughter, as if humoring the child’s unyielding spirit. The mother’s smile grew wider as she asked, “In that case, if you were this princess’s prince, would you go to her no matter what stood in your path? And would the captured princess try to break out of her prison?”

The child responded with a resounding, “Yes!”

Hearing their answer, the mother broadened her smile even more. “Then I’ll teach you a secret spell.”

“A secret spell?” The child’s eyes twinkled.

The mother pressed a conspiratorial finger to her mouth to hush the child. “It’s a spell I’ve been saving since your father shared it with me before. If you use it, both the prince and the princess will be able to live happily ever after.”

“Tell me, Mother!” the child pleaded.

Gently, the mother advised, “But this spell will only work on someone who is really special to you. So you mustn’t use it until you find that person.”

“Yes, I understand,” said the child innocently.

With a genuine smile on her face, the woman shared the secret spell. Both the visible curl of her lips and the special words she shared would linger in the child’s heart. For there was one thing the child did not yet know: this would be the last conversation they would have with their kind mother. A last, irreplaceable moment. The tenderness of her expression and gaze, the warmth of her hand, and the sweet

time they spent together would forever be imprinted in the child's memory.

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The sight of colorful tents and unfamiliar figures bustling to and fro spread out before me beneath the azure sky. I heard foreign languages mixed in with the trickle of conversation. I saw men and women with dark brown skin, unusual for Sauslind, clad in risqué outfits—or so they looked beneath all-encompassing cloaks with pulled hoods, allowing only the person's eyes to peek out. It made for a rather suspicious style of dress. The children were just the same as they were anywhere else, however, and a rhythmical song in the background weaved through all the hubbub to reach my ears. Even the smells that drifted in through my nose carried exotic notes from a foreign land.

These were the Roma people, who were no rare sight on the continent's highways. Yet this year, included among their number was a different group of people: the Stars of Thistle. The Stars of Thistle were a group of scholars from the Holy City of Sulu Qwun. They and their followers came here once every three years, after their researchers finished their academic conferences.

There was a theory that the scholars themselves were of Roma descent, given that they didn't mingle with traveling tradesmen and journeyed with the Roma. Thus, they were met with the same discrimination and stereotyping that the Roma received on the Ars continent. Although long regarded with fear and awe, impressions of them had improved the moment Sulu Qwun was recognized for its authority as an academic powerhouse through the Stars of Thistle's knowledge and research results. They had received invitations from various countries' academic institutions, been invited to work as tutors for nobles, and even been directly contacted by royalty as well.

Once every three years they would appear, holding their freshly presented scholarly works. Then they would line up a gratuitous number of street stalls. Not only did they carry these new volumes with them, but they also brought difficult to obtain tomes from the Old Kingdom, as well as other publications, both famous and unheard of.

Surely there was no better sight in the world that could make a book-loving Bernstein want to squeal from joy than this. My heart hammered with anticipation, unbidden (and unladylike). I was just about ready to dive into this foreign ocean for an adventure, propelled by the pounding in my chest, when a soft hand firmly rooted me in place.

"Eli," he said with an irresistible, dazzling smile.

It all began on a bland, ordinary day.

I saw off my father and brother as they left for the palace, then discussed matters of the house in fine detail with the head butler and maid, and then made my own preparations and boarded the coach that had been sent from the palace to fetch me. Not to sound pretentious, but since I had become the prince's fiancée, I was now carried to and fro by a carriage emblazoned with the royal family's crest. At first our retainers reacted with surprise and fear upon seeing it, but after four years it had become a familiar sight to them. They were now comfortable enough to engage the guards and coachman in idle chatter.

I sat inside the swaying carriage with my maid, still carrying anxiety from what had happened the other day, when we came rolling to a stop at our usual spot at the special entrance for the royal family.

It was here that the unusual began to unfold. His Highness's maids, who had been waiting for my arrival, dragged me off to a separate room and suddenly forced me to change my clothes.

"What? Pardon, but just what is the meaning of—"

"We're doing this at the request of His Highness, Lady Elianna," they said, coercing me along with their smiles.

Doubt remained firmly planted in my head as they wrapped me in plain dress. Its functionality met my preferences, given its lack of pomp and unnecessary decoration, but I refused to believe such attire was appropriate for the palace. Was this truly at His Highness's behest...? It was as I tilted my head in confusion that Prince Christopher appeared, as if he'd been waiting for the perfect opportunity.

"Have you finished preparing, Eli?"

I glanced back at him and found myself at a loss for words. Even the prince was dressed in similarly bland garb, looking like a knight. I had only ever seen him dressed as the crown prince before, so seeing him like this, well...I realize it's rude of me to say, but given that he looked like a simple hedge knight, I froze, thinking that some stranger had suddenly appeared.

The prince scrutinized me from the front then gave his earnest impression. "Hmm. I knew it, your spacy aura trumps the clothes, making it obvious that you're a noble lady trying to disguise yourself. I wonder if this will work..." The way His Highness seemed sincerely troubled over what to do just heightened my suspicions even more.

Also, Your Highness, if you would permit me to comment on one thing... I thought inwardly, You yourself ooze such nobility and grace that you can't hide behind that knight costume. Everything about him stood out—his dazzling blonde hair, his sunny blue eyes, the handsome

features of his face, and his elegant disposition.

My heart sang seeing how different he looked now than usual. Ever since the events from the other day, I had tried to stay beside him as I always had, but my feelings wouldn't seem to settle. It was a complicated mix of wanting to stay by his side but also wanting to run away, while feeling painfully lonely when we were actually apart. I, the Bibliophile Princess, was plagued by such feelings that I couldn't even begin to explain.

Unaware of my anxiety, Lord Glen, who himself was in similarly informal clothes, looking like a merchant's bodyguard, stopped the prince. "If you don't think it's going to work, cut this out. Okay? If we go now, we can still make it. I can already picture Alex pissed off and the veins in his forehead bulging."

"I finished handling all matters that required urgent attention. Our political situation isn't so weak that it would become unstable just because I stepped away from government affairs for a day, would it?" The prince's pride was on full display as he added, "I refuse to believe the administration we've created would collapse that easily."

"I know, but..." Lord Glen continued to hesitate. "You were just talking with Alex yesterday about how there was fighting about the budget. Something like how, thanks to your proposal, Baron Maudsley has been persistently demanding a meeting."

"Government affairs would come to a standstill if I humored every ridiculous appeal. Besides, his budget request was refused on legitimate grounds. He's making light of the government if he thinks speaking with me will get him anywhere." The prince suddenly had the same strict look on his face I'd glimpsed before in his office. And when Lord Glen attempted to protest, the prince turned to him with an icy expression. "You've already changed clothes and yet you still don't know when to give up, Glen. If you want to continue yowling like a dog, then I'll let you go alone to receive Alex's lecture."

"Don't make horrible threats like that so off-handedly..."

The conversation had proceeded far enough that now I understood more of what was going on. It seemed the prince was trying to sneak out, dragging me along with him.

"Your Highness," I spoke up. "Pardon me, but are you certain about this? Fortunately, I have no official business plans myself, but the importance of my presence cannot even be compared to your own."

The prince glanced back at me, flashing a smile that made my heart flutter. "The Stars of Thistle," he said.

My body jumped and I gulped. I knew that right now the group was stationed in Sauslind, but...

"Eli, weren't you the one who said you wanted to see the books

and choose them yourself, even if just once? If you let today slip by, they won't come again for another three years. So come on, let's go together, okay?"

"But, Your Highness..." Similar to Lord Glen, I tried to object as well. I was interested in the Stars of Thistle. But there was just one problem.

As I opened my mouth to protest, the prince grabbed my hand with his and cupped his other hand gently beneath my chin. The atmosphere turned romantic, as if beckoned forth by his gaze, and his thumb brushed over my lips. "You're forbidden from calling me 'Your Highness' today. We've gone through all the trouble of disguising ourselves, after all. Actually, no, enough of that. I want you to call me by my name when we're not performing our official duties, Eli."

My cheeks rapidly took the vibrant red sheen of an apple. I didn't need to see a mirror to know I was blushing; I could feel the heat concentrate in my cheeks as if I had a fever.

His Highness trapped me in his sweet gaze. "Today I am simply your knight, Lady Elianna. And I will protect you. Won't you venture out with me?" His gentle words, sounding as if they'd come straight out of a play, seemed to be entreating me, but why was it this felt like more of a demand than a request?

I flapped my lips open and shut as I fumbled for words, but the prince just continued to keep that sweet smile plastered on his face. Nearby, Lord Glen let out a sigh and turned his back on the both of us. I didn't wish for him to pretend that he couldn't see anything; I wanted him to step in and help.

The prince's face grew steadily closer, closing in on me, when a low voice squeezed in, "Pardon me for interrupting. But um...with all due respect..." It was my maid, the one who had accompanied me from the Bernstein estate, now wringing out her words as if she were exhaling them on a quiet breath. I actually had two maids, but the senior of the two was off on an errand, so the one attending me today was one that had been sent from the palace to me, a young girl named Annie. "The master stated in no uncertain terms that the lady was not to go anywhere near the Stars of Thistle. In addition, she is to keep away from the Roma people as well."

That wasn't specific to Sauslind; all noble ladies were advised as such from the time they were children. The Roma's religion differed from all others on the Ars continent, and they always wandered, never settling down in any specific country. The rest of the continent had shunned the Roma, with their unique culture cultivated over centuries, since long ago. Such enmity had begun to soften thanks to the influence of the Stars of Thistle, but it didn't change the disdain people held toward them. This was especially true for noble ladies. If

rumors were to spread that you were involved with the Roma, it would ruin your reputation. Annie's concern was understandable.

The prince smiled back at her. "I'll be with her. I swear that no harm will come to Eli's reputation. Plus, the marquess hasn't even stated why she's to keep away, has he? I've thought that odd ever since I first heard about his order years ago. The Bernsteins aren't even the type to be preoccupied with public appearances... Do you know why he's prohibited it?"

"No," Annie answered, troubled.

His Highness gave a sharp nod. "In that case, Eli, you'll just keep regretting it if you don't go."

"Your Highness..." I mumbled, feeling my heart tremble even louder.

It was just as His Highness had said; I'd wanted to go ever since I first learned about the Stars of Thistle and how they came once every three years with stalls to sell their books. But my entire house, starting with my father, stubbornly refused to grant me permission to go. Instead, we had sent servants each year to purchase tomes for us. Plus, the Stars of Thistle only used the main highway to travel, so the only opportunity I had to make contact with them was while I was in the capital.

I must've spoken of this wish to His Highness when we were both younger and that was how he knew. My heart ached from the fact that I couldn't recall our past together. That was one cause for my anxiety. But my chest warmed with happiness knowing that His Highness hadn't forgotten and was still trying to grant my wish. In fact, I'm afraid to admit, the prince's devotion softened whatever guilt I held over violating my father's instructions.

His Highness smiled at me, my fate sealed. "Now that that's decided, Eli, let's have you practice saying my name until we arrive at the market."

"Huh...?"

"How about I punish you every time you call me 'Your Highness'? Of course, *I* get to decide what that punishment will be. Don't worry, it's a simple task. You need only call me by my name."

"Huh...?" I repeated once again as the prince dragged me along outside the palace, his smile making perfectly clear he'd entertain no protest.

Lord Glen gave off an aura of resignation as he heaved a sigh. Annie, for her part, looked uneasy but had no way of opposing His Highness any further. Thus, she followed along behind us with an intensely troubled expression on her face.

Until we arrived at the Roma market, with its sprawling merchant stalls, I would spend the entire carriage ride receiving punishment

from His Highness for my inability to say his name. He seemed to enjoy himself, which made it all the more vexing for me, but it was all I could do to frantically keep up with his game, unable to sort out what was happening in my head.

That brings us to the present.

On our way, we swapped our royal carriage for a bland, inconspicuous one, and when we arrived, I trembled with emotion at what I saw before me. So long had I been interested in coming here. The first time I saw the books by the Stars of Thistle, I couldn't help myself; curiosity filled me. Yet because of my father's orders, I had been unable to visit the market myself, and since both my brother and father had refrained from going, I didn't feel I could be selfish and insist I be allowed. Instead, I'd imagined every intricate detail in my mind.

And now, for the first time, I was finally able to see the market for myself. All I had to do was outstretch my hand and I could touch those brand new books. I could smell them, feel them for myself. I could even *speak* with the Stars of Thistle. This place wasn't like the bookstores downtown. It was special, a market centered entirely around books, a sight you could only see once every three years. Was there anything else in life that could provoke this much joy? One could hardly blame me for wanting to dive right in.



His Highness gave a gentle, albeit slightly bitter, smile as he watched me unable to contain my excitement. “Eli, I’ve already made this quite clear, but you mustn’t let go of my hand today. If you do, I will take you straight back home. Understood?”

He was acting as if he were my guardian. It was vexing to be treated as a child, but the dream world come to life in front of me kept me too distracted to care.

“Yes, Lord Chris!” I answered with a beaming smile.

His Highness’s smooth features froze over. Though unsure why he’d suddenly gone so stiff, I yanked his hand and pulled him along with me anyway. I didn’t notice the expressions of exasperation or wry smiles on the faces of Lord Glen and the other guards following along a short distance behind us; I was too enamored with the books before me.

Annie, who was staying behind alongside the coachman, called entreatingly after me. “My lady! Please don’t go off with strangers, not even if they offer you a rare book!”

The prince and I dove into the foreign sea, alive with energetic hustle and bustle. Even the unfamiliar music only served to make my heart sing louder. I could have eyes all over my body and they wouldn’t be enough to take in all the sights. In fact, I was so elated that I couldn’t even decide which stall we should head toward first.

Ahh, can’t I just start from one end and go to each one, scooping up all the good books I find?

It was then, at the height of my excitement, that the prince seemed to recompose himself, and I could hear a laugh from beside me. His hand gave mine a gentle squeeze. “Eli, calm down.”

“Your Hi—” I swallowed the words just as I almost let them slip. I already knew to a painful degree (courtesy of his punishments) that I wasn’t to speak his true title today. Admittedly, they weren’t *actually* painful, just embarrassingly romantic. Still, my heart felt heavy over the almost-gaffe I’d made in my state of excitement.

But the prince merely smiled at me and said, “Don’t worry, we have time. Even if your attention gets lost in books, I’ll be here to reel you back into reality, I promise.” His voice was reassuring, full of confidence, and his gaze was so gentle as he looked at me. For the umpteenth time today, my heart leaped from my chest.

From beside us came a kind but teasing voice that said, “You there, the young-looking couple. If you’re here to purchase books, my shop has a dazzling assortment. How would you like a tale of romance? It would suit a romantic pair like you two perfectly.”

I looked to find a dark-skinned storekeeper with a sunny disposition amiably recommending his tomes. Our outfits made it

plenty clear we were disguising ourselves to stroll about the market, but the man was friendly nonetheless, as if people like us weren't a rare sight at an event like this.

Although my cheeks colored in embarrassment by the belated realization that my hand was linked with the prince's, I still managed to join him and peer inside the stall. Beneath the open, clear blue sky, tomes were crammed together in rows, some looking quite weathered. There were even some whose covers were so sunbaked that the letters were no longer legible. That saddened me.

His Highness stepped in front of me and cast his gaze around the stall. "I see you mainly stock specialty books published up until last year."

"Aha," said the shopkeep, "the dashing young man has a good eye, it seems. For the newer volumes, you'll have to head to the middle of the plaza. But you might find some good bargains here too. Take your time and have a look."

"Do you have *Writings of the Land* by Dr. Rezzi?" the prince asked.

"Dr. Rezzi's book is not only popular but in short supply. Even if we did have it, they always sell immediately."

"I suspected as much."

As His Highness mumbled to himself, I reached for a nearby tome. When the shopkeeper realized what I was holding, he said, "Ah, *The Star Traveler*, eh? It's a fairytale for kids, but adults can enjoy it too. I'm sure you'd like it as well, young lady."

I carefully extracted my hand from the prince's and flipped through the pages. It was just as the shopkeeper had said. This was a fairytale written by an unknown author long ago; it was a simple, sparsely illustrated book that detailed the various adventurers of the star children. In Sauslind, adventure tales of the Hero King were so beloved that, unfortunately, *The Star Traveler* didn't enjoy much popularity here. Even so, it was a memorable fairytale for me.

"Do you like it, Eli?" His Highness asked, as if ready to purchase it immediately.

"No, not this one," I said simply. "This is the Sulu Qwun language version, isn't it? If possible, I would like to have one written in Old Lacan. Or if you have one written during the time of the Kai Arg Empire that would be good as well, though I would most prefer the Fire's Thorns version. Do you have any of those?"

"Excuse me...?" The shopkeeper blurted with a dumbfounded smile on his face.

Feeling a bit irritated with the way he blinked at me as if I were speaking to him in tongues, I was about to repeat myself when the prince kindly stepped in to reframe my question. "Sir, do you have any other versions of *The Star Traveler*? If possible, we'd prefer one

written in a language other than Sulu Qwun.”

“Y-Yeah, okay.” The man had a bewildered look on his face as he disappeared into the back of the store.

I watched him and tilted my head. Was there something weird about the way I worded my question?

His Highness gave a wry laugh as he said, “This may be a book market, but that doesn’t mean every person here is knowledgeable about books. Plus, they only do this once every three years. The staff in our bookstores downtown may actually be more educated than the people here. So you may have difficulty getting the other person to understand sometimes if you don’t speak in layman’s terms.”

“So that was the problem...”

The market was run by the Roma who traveled alongside the Stars of Thistle, so I had just assumed they were learned when it came to books. However, having seen the sunbaked covers of some of these tomes, I now understood that wasn’t the case for all of them.

That aside, I was surprised at how extensively informed the prince was. While I gave him credit for minimizing his presence and putting on a splendid performance as a knight, the way he’d spoken so casually to the shopkeeper made me wonder if he’d been here before.

“Anyway,” the prince said, “I didn’t know *The Star Traveler* was written in so many different languages. Well, I suppose it makes sense. Different countries have different languages, so naturally their picture books and fairy tales are written in their native tongue.”

He peered coolly down at the book in my hand, making my heart skip a beat. “*The Star Traveler* is a bit of a special case,” I told him. “Tomes that are written in ancient languages are often used as textbooks for classical study, but in this book, the details of the children’s adventures change slightly depending on when it was republished and in what country.”

“Oh really?” His Highness hummed, intrigued. “Strange, considering the author is unknown. Maybe the translators changed some of the details?”

“That’s possible,” I said. “Father has a collection of them gathered in his study, that’s how I knew there were so many different versions. I’d always thought he collected them because my mother loved them, but perhaps there is a different reason.”

“Certainly an intriguing mystery. Maybe I should try rereading the story again.”

Surprised, I asked, “Your Highness, you read fairy tales?”

“...Eli.”

Realizing my mistake, I slapped my hand over my mouth, but now that the words had already been spoken, I couldn’t take it back. His Highness was grinning at me, and yet his eyes looked like those of a

hunter who'd captured their prey.

"You really want me to punish you that badly, hm?"

I became flustered once he pulled my hand away from my mouth. Memories of our exchange back in the carriage came rushing back, and I immediately felt the flush of heat on my cheeks. He took hold of my chin, and just as his clear blue eyes creased in a sweet smile, a voice came to my aid.

"If you two would like to uh, get up close and personal, would you mind doing it somewhere private?" It was the shopkeeper, cradling books in his arms.

Relieved, I apologized to him and said, "We'll be more careful," and casually slipped out of His Highness's grip. I definitely couldn't hear the prince quietly click his tongue in dismay. Nope, not a sound.

We took a number of tomes the owner offered as well as a few other foreign books that caught my curiosity. We continued our shopping venture and discovered that each stall offered a different selection. There was such a varied assortment; wordless picture books lined up alongside intense academic ones, illustrated reference books on plants and minerals, encyclopedias for theology, depictions of fantastical creatures, foreign songbooks, and a treatise regarding ancient epitaphs which I'd never seen before. I felt like I didn't have the time (or enough eyes) to take it all in.

The only reason we were able to visit several stalls was because as soon as I froze and lost myself in reading a book, His Highness would gently call my name and pull me along. He would immediately purchase any tome I tried to read. Soon Lord Glen and the others, who were supposed to be acting as our guards, were instead transformed into luggage carriers.

I should mention, by the way, I didn't have any money on hand, so everything was paid for by the prince. I felt embarrassed having him do all that for me, and yet for some reason His Highness seemed positively euphoric as he paid for them all.

"If there's something you want, speak freely, Eli."

If Your Highness so enjoys squandering money, I fear for the future of our country, I thought. Seeing how heavy the bags Lord Glen and the others were carrying looked, I hesitated over whether it was about time to deliver some candid advice to the prince or not. Though I will clarify, we didn't buy *every* book that we saw.

"...A history of theories on the Plummer Ruins?"

"Yes," I said. "Prince Theodore was searching for this book."

"Eli." The way the prince's voice rumbled, deep and low, startled me. He took the tome from me, his eyes no longer smiling. "My uncle has his own time and finances. He can come here any time he likes to purchase it."

“Yes, but—” I started to protest, thinking it a waste since we’d managed to find it, but the prince put his forefinger to my lips.

“I forbid you from speaking any other man’s name today.”

The list of things I was forbidden to say today certainly was a long one.

I blinked in confusion, and the prince laughed, his eyes gazing at me invitingly. “Maybe I should punish you for this too.”

“Your Hi—”

“Hm?” His blue eyes gleamed sharply.

I gulped, my eyes darting back and forth. “Um, your hip... There was a bug on your hip, but it flew off just now.” I pointed in the distance, trying to distract from my slip up when I heard a laugh from nearby. Surprised, I turned my gaze to find a young man dressed in clothing evocative of the Roma’s dance garb.

The moment we spotted him, the prince’s mood took a sudden downturn as he asked, “Why are *you* here?”

“Oh, come on, I couldn’t miss a display like this, now could I?”

There was something terrifyingly menacing about the way His Highness smiled. He kept his lips stretched upward as he gave the simple command, “Go home.”

The man’s boyish, honey-colored hair certainly was rare for a Roma. I tilted my head. “Are you acquainted with this man, Your Hi—ahem, Lord Chris?” When I glanced back at the prince, he blinked and then smiled pleasantly at me.

“No, not at all. Just a stranger, it seems. There’s all kinds of people in this market. You should be careful too, Eli, if someone you don’t know tries to talk to you.”

“I’m not a child.” This time I couldn’t stay quiet.

The prince answered with a laugh. “I just worry because you’re so cute.”

How should I put this? Ever since the other day, it seemed as if His Highness’s behavior toward me lacked any restraint, like a door without a latch to keep it closed. Though I was sure, as my cheeks warmed bright red, that his lack of restraint was partly my fault.

Before the sweet air of romance could envelop us again, the man from a moment ago, who the prince had so nonchalantly brushed off, frantically cut in. “Isn’t that a bit cold? Especially after I came searching for you two with some particularly *interesting* information.”

“There has never been a time when something you deemed interesting was actually anything useful. So enough, go home. Today is my (self-proclaimed) day off,” the prince said coldly, pulling my hand along as he began to leave.

“Whaat?” the cheerful boy protested, undaunted. Then, with an innocent kind of jab, he added, “Are you sure, even if it’s information

pertaining to Lady Elianna?"

His Highness's interest took such a quick turnaround the moment I was mentioned that even I noticed his sudden change of heart. But as he turned to look back and opened his mouth to respond, we could hear an outbreak of commotion joined by a flurry of voices, a cacophony of adults angrily shouting accompanied by noisy shrieks.

Surprised, we looked to find a handful of children scrambling to escape from the chaos. Just as soon as I glimpsed them, His Highness took a protective step in front of me, and Lord Glen and the other guards encircled us protectively.

"Thieves! Grab them!" someone shouted.

The children were almost like fish in the ocean with the way they weaved between the cracks of bodies in the crowd. Unfortunately, the smallest of them struggled to balance the weight of the prize in his arms and tripped, scattering the books he was holding across the ground.

As I looked down in shock, another older boy came running up to him, shouting, "Rene!" In the time it took him to rouse the smaller child to his feet, the adults caught up and seized them both.

The man from a moment ago with the honey-colored hair leaned in and said, "Lord Chris, you would be wise to take those two children into your care."

His Highness gave him a skeptical look but decided to save the questions for later. He left my protection to Lord Glen and stepped forward.

The men who had captured the children had a rough, bodyguard-like air about them. It made me wonder if hired muscle was an occupation even among the Roma people. I could understand the necessity; fighting was a daily occurrence in marketplaces like this one.

"The same Roma blood and yet you're stealing from your own, huh? You sure got a lotta nerve."

"You said it. Hey kids, where are your parents? Why the hell'd you even steal these books to begin with?"

"What, did you think you could carry these off to the capital? Pfft, they wouldn't even give brats like you the time of day."

As the prince tried to calculate the appropriate time to swoop in, one of the boys—the older one who looked about ten and was being violently prodded by the gang of grown men—suddenly lifted his head, his eyes unyielding. The words he spoke immediately changed the atmosphere of the entire area. "You got it wrong! A noble ordered us to do this! He told us to go steal some books—that he didn't need to pay us Roma any money for them. He said he was a Bernstein!"

Excuse me...?

I blinked my eyes as the mood of those present before me took a sudden, chilling turn. Even the ruffians immediately seethed with hostility. “A Bernstein, you say...?”

“So they choose *this* year to show up? I’ve got a score to settle with them.”

“Me too! I’m gonna beat them at their own games this time!”

“The chief said to bring them to him if they showed up again, no matter the circumstances of their visit.”

As the hooligans groused, I just continued to bat my eyes open and closed. Did my family really have some connection with the Roma after all? Was that why my father had so fiercely insisted I not approach them? Still, while my family did adore books, we had no custom of roughing people up to obtain them. Frankly, my family was wise enough to foresee the defeat that would result from a physical showdown and therefore didn’t engage in them to begin with. Nor, as far as I knew, did we have any connection to those who worked as hired muscle. But it did shock me to see these men hold such grudges against us, the thirst for revenge burning within them.

Lord Glen turned to the man with honey-colored hair. “What’s all this about? Did you know all this would happen? Is that why you came? To put a stop to it?”

“No... I’m surprised myself; their response was rather unexpected. The Bernsteins sure are famous among the Roma people, eh?”

Famous was one word, though perhaps infamous might better suit what we were witnessing. It was certainly unexpected though; I expected them to be up in arms about the insinuation that we were looking down on them as sub-human, but the men instead reacted most acutely to the mention of the Bernstein name itself.

“Hey, brats, where is this noble that ordered you around?”

The boys shrank back as the men encroached. More accurately put, the older boy was protectively shielding the smaller one. I wondered if they were brothers. Their facial features were difficult to make out from where I was standing, but they didn’t seem to resemble each other at all.

“Could I step in for a moment?” His Highness interrupted with a quiet voice. While he’d previously diminished his royal presence to keep from being noticed, he now wielded it in a way that commanded the attention from all those gathered. Unaffected by their gazes, he flashed a relaxed smile. And as he calmly began trying to mediate the situation, he was cut off by some unexpected interference.

The younger boy, about six or seven by the looks of him, lifted his face. His vibrant blue eyes lit up when he spotted the prince, and he flew right toward him. “Daddy!”

Chapter 2: Her Anxiety

“...Uh, so basically...”

We moved from the scene of the commotion and plunked ourselves down at the corner of the street stalls, now busy with the noon rush. Utterly unlike the neat and orderly cities built around castles, the Roma market seemed jumbled and chaotic. They had restaurants stationed close to their book stalls, and near those a group exhibition featuring musical dance and fortune tellers. We were currently sitting at one such eating place for lunch while Lord Glen extracted information from the two children.

His Highness had somehow convinced the rough-looking men from before to back down. At first they had hounded him with questions like, “So you’re this kid’s father?” and, “You got some kinda connection with those Bernsteins?” But His Highness merely aimed his gleaming smile at them—one that made even me shiver—and forced them back. The men then conceded after he had a couple of words with them. As for what he’d said, I had no idea.

Lord Glen looked worn thin somehow as he tried to confirm the details of the boys’ story with the oldest of the two, who was greedily shoveling his food down. “So this Rene kid’s mom is sick, and you guys don’t have the money to take her to see a doctor. That’s when that noble approached you and gave you those orders, promising that if you stole those books then he would take her to a doctor. And you and those other kids were just pitching in to help Rene.”

The older boy, the one who looked about ten and referred to himself as Paolo, gave a nod even as he was completely immersed in his food. “Rene’s like my little bro. He’s the smallest and weakest in our group.” Proudly, he added, “That’s why I stepped in to save him.”

Lord Glen already looked completely drained as he continued his questioning. “Okay then, older bro, maybe you can explain this to me. Why does this Rene kid think Chris is his dad?”

Paolo finally lifted his head from his meal. The maturity he’d shown before disappeared, making him look appropriately young as he stared blankly forward. With his dark eyes, a common color among the Roma people, he glanced between His Highness and the boy who’d taken position on his lap. “What do you mean ‘think’? That guy is his dad, right?”

Lord Glen pressed a hand to his forehead as if fighting back an oncoming headache.

I believe Lord Alexei already has that gesture patented, I thought.

Still, I worried about the prince, who’d had the same smile pasted

on his face this entire time. The boy Rene had been glued to His Highness ever since he'd called the prince his "daddy." When Prince Christopher had tried to pry the child away, Rene's eyes had filled with tears, and thus even His Highness had been forced to accept the situation.

He listened to Paolo's explanation and kept his unfaltering smile turned my way. "Eli, just know there is *nothing* questionable about my past, okay?"

Your Highness, you have repeated that line several times in the last few minutes.

Paolo peered over at me then glanced between the two of us. "Uh... You are Rene's dad, right? Isn't that why you saved us?"

"Oh? Did I say something to suggest that I am, indeed, his father?" His Highness's smile broadened, and Paolo shivered and promptly fell silent.

From beside the prince, Lord Glen said, "He's a kid. Don't start that with him." It was an admonishment I didn't quite understand.

A frantic voice cut in from the prince's lap. "My father is a knight!" It was Rene, his cloudless blue eyes earnest in their plea toward the adults present. "He's got the same blue eyes as me, and he's an incredible knight. My mommy said so. She said he'd definitely come to get us someday. And you're him, you're my daddy!" He threw his arms tight around the prince, clinging to him.

This would have been an impossible sight at the palace. Child or not, Rene could legitimately be punished for his disrespect. In fact, the other guards (aside from Lord Glen) were all furrowing their brows in displeasure. Lord Glen had been the one to step in when they immediately tried to dispose of the child.

"Ahh, I think I get it." Lord Glen turned to Paolo to clarify. "So what you're saying is you and Rene have never actually met his father, right? You're just assuming it's Chris based on the features Rene's mother described?"

"Well, that's not the only reason," he answered, face muddled with confusion. "Those muscled men only backed down because Rene's dad... I mean, this nice guy here said he'd take care of us and mentioned the Stars of Thistle. That means he's gotta know them personally. Rene's mom, Marissa, is a dancer. Her family is part of the Stars of Thistle. The only way for a knight of Sauslind to know the Stars of Thistle would be if his lover's family was actually part of them, right?"

I see. So that's what's going on here.

"Eli... What's with that look in your eyes?"

What? It's nothing, Your Highness.

By the sounds of it, the Stars of Thistle were regarded as superior

even among the Roma, and for someone to be acquainted with them would mean they had quite the connections. The Stars of Thistle didn't give much credence to the authority of nobles, so trying to use that route to engage with them was at best futile and at worst dangerous—dangerous because it could incur their displeasure. The latter would result in a damaged reputation and ill rumors being spread across the continent.

Hmm... It felt as if I'd heard a story like that just recently.

At any rate, the Stars of Thistle were widely renowned in the famous Holy City of Sulu Qwun. There were many who wanted to approach them, but the Stars were an academic and (perhaps as a result of which) eccentric bunch who'd been courted for years by those who were desperate to receive teaching. It seemed Paolo had interpreted the fact that the prince had such a connection to mean he was personally related to them.

It was then, as Lord Glen stared up at the sky, troubled, and as His Highness retained that chilling smile plastered on his face, a cheerful voice broke in. "The love story of the female dancer and the knight has been turned into a play and is even beloved as a romance novel. Its popularity boomed about five or six years ago, but I had no idea that little Rene here was the child of those two. Nor that Lord Chris was the knight in the tale."

The boy with honey-colored hair from before made his reentrance, after having suddenly disappeared earlier, and was now holding a steamed manju (a sweet treat famous in an eastern country). He casually took a seat beside me, as if completely unaware of the prince's frosty gaze. "Hm? Lady Elianna, aren't you going to eat? Ahh, are you a little wary of food you've never eaten before, perhaps?"

"No. I've eaten eastern food before. I had our cook create some dishes for me when I read *The Travels of Parco Molo*."

"Not surprising, I'm sure you Bernsteins have an incredible cook that can deliver all kinds of dishes from different countries' cuisines."

I tilted my head as he murmured knowingly to himself. "Are you acquainted with my house?"

The man's smooth features, still looking a bit boyish for his age, contorted, eyes filled with grief. "We just exchanged greetings not that long ago, and yet you still haven't realized who I am... Am I really that forgettable...?" Then, stiffly, he added, "My name is Alan."

"Oh goodness. I didn't know you were Roma, Lord Alan."

This time it was His Highness who breathed a sigh. "Eli," he said, bringing me back to my senses. "Anyway, let's eat before the food gets cold. You as well. You can't eat your food if you keep staring at me."

Rene peered up anxiously at the prince. Although His Highness had smiled warmly as he called out to the boy, he'd still treated Rene

as if he were a stranger.

“Come on,” said the prince, turning the boy gently toward the table. I watched, eyes wide with surprise, as he dotingly pulled a plate close and tucked a wooden spoon in the boy’s hand. Was His Highness actually fond of children? Or was it my imagination?

Beside him, Lord Alan’s sorrowful expression had taken a sudden turn. He was now grinning almost teasingly as he opened his mouth to say something, but His Highness cut in reprovingly with, “Alan.” The prince wasn’t smiling. In fact, his eyes were as cold as ice, reminiscent of Lord Alexei, as he stared down the man. “Why don’t we discuss your report elsewhere? Glen, come.”

His Highness lifted the boy from his lap and reseated him in a chair, giving Rene’s hair a tousle after the latter looked worryingly up at the prince. He then left the other two guards behind, dragging only Lord Alan and Lord Glen along with him as he moved toward a stretch of wall running opposite of where we were seated.

As Rene and I stared after him, Paolo said to the younger boy, “Hey, just hurry up and eat your food. We almost never get free grub like this.”

I gave the doting older boy a glance before deciding to follow his advice and focus on my food as well. Rene seemed to remember his empty stomach once he started digging in and soon became enamored with the food.

Paolo turned to me and said, “Hey, Little Lady.”

Little Lady? Was he talking to me perchance?

My hands froze, and I turned back to look at him. For a child he certainly was fixing me with a harsh, hostile look.

“You... Are you one of them? One of those Bernsteins?”

I was taken aback. Through the course of everything that had happened, I’d nearly forgotten that these boys had claimed it was a Bernstein who had ordered them to steal those books. I didn’t think my family was capable of ordering something so barbaric, but surely my protests wouldn’t convince the two otherwise. And Paolo must have heard Lord Alan calling me a Bernstein before. Faced with the older boy’s cautious, suspicious gaze, I nodded honestly. “That’s correct. My name is Elianna Bernstein.”

He immediately scrunched up his face. “So you’re with that mole?”

Mole? I wondered.

Paolo must have sensed my confusion, because he went on to explain, “The mole noble. That pig-headed, cocky guy. I know he’s looking down on us, that’s obvious. But he promised he would take Rene’s mom to see a doctor.” He bit his lip in frustration.

Doctors were a valuable resource. The shortage of them was in

part due to a lack of people with the necessary medical knowledge and experience, but it was also because many were exclusively employed by nobles. That trend was losing popularity now, but even still city doctors remained scarce, and low-income earners struggled to have their illnesses properly diagnosed and treated. Considering the discrimination and stereotyping the Roma faced, the problem was probably all the more prevalent for them.

I fell silent, and Paolo's sharp gaze turned up at me. "You all look down at people like they're worth less than you. That's why I hate nobles."

"I despise them as well," I responded honestly, looking him straight in the eyes. "I find those who would bully the weak distasteful. In *The Star Traveler*, when the traveler is being bullied by the crow he met in the wasteland, he says, 'It makes me very sad when you bully me. And that's why when I meet other crows, I'm not going to bully them.' Even though nobles and other people look down on them, the Roma are proud of how they live. I think that's wonderful."

Paolo shrunk back, his eyes swimming. "I-It's a little late to be trying flattery now. You already admitted you're a Bernstein, didn't you?"

True enough.

I suspected the person who had ordered the boys was falsely using the Bernstein name, but that wasn't something I could prove right here. After all, we seemed to have an infamously bad reputation among the Roma already. Still, there was something I had to say, on the honor of my family.

"Lord Paolo," I began.

"Lord Paolo?" he echoed back, jaw dropped as if I had just spoken to him in a foreign language.

I gazed back at him with sincerity. "My house would *never* do something as uncouth as stealing a book. Even if that book was something we desperately wanted to read—desperately wanted to get our hands on..."

"Yeah?" he prompted.

"We would find some other way to read it, even if we had to beg or drug the person to do it!" One reading was enough; once we'd read a book, we could make a clean copy of it by memory.

I must have gotten too fired up in my response because Paolo stared blankly back at me and said, "Isn't drugging someone actually worse?" The nearby guards were also desperately trying to stifle their own laughter.

A hesitant voice spoke up from across the table. "I... I know about *The Star Traveler*." It was Rene, the boy whose blue eyes so resembled

His Highness's. His hair was a common shade among the Roma, a deep shade of brown that nearly looked black, but his slightly paler skin and eye color made him stand out among the rest. "My mommy read it for me. She said *The Star Traveler* is like a guidepost for us Roma."

I smiled back at him. "My mother also read it to me when I was little. It was her most beloved book."

Rene timidly returned the smile, and my heart warmed. Nothing about him resembled the prince other than his eye color, but as someone who was regarded as the "Library Ghost" and constantly feared by children, receiving a smile from a boy like him felt particularly precious to me.

"You, uh...sure are an odd noble." Paolo was wiping Rene's mouth with his handkerchief as he mumbled, seemingly unsure now of what attitude to take with me. "Now I'm not sure if you really are with that mole or not." Once Paolo was done wiping his mouth, Rene hopped down and came over to sit beside me.

I conjured the image of my father and brother in my mind. Neither bore even the slightest resemblance to a mole, although they did have a habit of holing themselves up in their studies to read. I couldn't blame someone for comparing that behavior to a mole burrowing underground. Though such thoughts had little relevance here.

Beside me, Rene gradually seemed to be nodding off now that his stomach was full. I gently stroked the top of his head, just as my own mother had done for me long ago. It seemed to relax him because soon he was leaning his weight up against me. The action was so endearing that I moved my arm so he could more comfortably rest up against my chest.

"You know, Little Lady..." Paolo leaned in to whisper, careful the guards couldn't overhear. He kept a cautious eye on the sleeping Rene and briefly glanced at His Highness and the others in the corner, who were still talking. "I get now that you're a bit different from the other nobles. That's why I'm gonna go ahead and ask you, what's your relationship with that nice guy that saved us?"

I stared back at him and blinked. What exactly did he mean by that?

He pressed on impatiently. "What I mean is, are you two lovers or something?"

The instant I heard that word, heat went racing up my face all the way to my ears, and the words stuck in my throat. For four years now I had worn the label of fiancée, and thanks to recent events, I now knew that our engagement wasn't simply for show. So while being called his future bride did make my heart flutter, there was nothing

for me to be confused about. Yet I flushed easily when I heard the word “lovers,” and the very question Paolo posed had been a source of anxiety for me since the events from a few days ago.

I was conscious of the fact that His Highness was someone special to me, as a man, as someone irreplaceable. And when he reciprocated those sentiments, when he poured his affection into his hands and touched me, I was filled with an indescribable joy. That was also why I wanted to remember how the two of us had met.

The reason I was able to be at his side now was because he treasured the memory of our first meeting and took an interest in me. Had that not happened, I might never have ended up where I was now. Thus, I felt obligated to remember what sparked all of this. More than anything, I wanted to reclaim that memory because it was something we had shared. And yet I remained completely unable to recall any part of our past. Never before had I felt such shame that my memory with books was excellent and yet poor in every other regard.

Today was a good example. His Highness had brought me here, to a place I had longed to visit since I was a child, because he remembered us talking about it when we were younger. That realization left me feeling helpless as an overwhelming sense of anxiety coiled in my chest.

Ever since we resolved the misunderstandings that day, the prince would try to bridge the distance between us when we were alone together, with a sweet smile and warm attitude. I was sure this was because he was treating me as his lover first and foremost, rather than simply a fiancée. But I had to wonder, was I worthy of receiving that kind of attention? I had no confidence that I could actually conduct myself like a proper lover when I couldn't even recall our first meeting.

“I'm not quite sure I would say lover...” I mumbled.

The word didn't seem proper. Perhaps if I could retrieve that memory, then I would finally have the confidence to call myself his “lover.” Crestfallen, I dropped my gaze.

Paolo, exasperated, said, “What's with that attitude? Not going to give a straight answer, huh? If that's the kinda attitude you're taking, that guy's gotta be pretty dissatisfied.”

I was taken aback. His Highness's expression never revealed as much, but I wondered if maybe he *did* feel unhappy with how flustered I always acted. What worried me the most was what the prince must think of me. Was he secretly disappointed that I still couldn't remember our past?

“I wonder, is he really...?” I blurted out, not even thinking that I was foisting such a heavy question on this young boy.

Paolo couldn't hide his perplexed and rankled expression. “What

the heck? You really throw me off. Now you're making it hard for me to ask a favor."

"Pardon?" I tilted my head.

He hesitantly explained, "Judging by what you said, I get the idea that guy's not actually Rene's dad. But, you know, Rene's always wanted his father. So I gotta ask. Could you lend that guy to us? Just one day's enough. He can be Rene's dad for a day."

"Um..."

As I froze, a chilly voice suddenly spoke out from behind me. "I would prefer if you asked me directly if you want a favor like that." It was Prince Christopher. He must have finished talking with the others.

Although only a short time had passed since I had last seen him, Lord Glen now looked even more gaunt than he had before.

His Highness peeled Rene away from me as if he were some kind of annoying adhesive that needed removing, causing Lord Alan, who was watching us, to look as if he might burst out in laughter at any moment. "Eli," the prince began. "Alan asked around some, but he wasn't able to pin down what involvement the Bernstein family has with the Roma. We have no other choice but to go and meet the Stars of Thistle."

"You think one of the Stars of Thistle would know?" I asked.

"No, but if they cooperate, it'll make it easier to get the Roma to tell us. It's good timing anyway since I had something I wanted to confirm. Although I'm not really looking forward to meeting *him*, but we're out of options," he mumbled bitterly, as if he loathed that things had come to this.

I couldn't help but feel guilty that it was a matter concerning my house that was causing him such grief.

"Um... What about the noble that ordered these children to steal?" I had to ask.

"Oh, that," the prince answered coolly. He had a gleaming smile on his face, one that should have looked charismatic to all who saw, and yet instead I felt a chill run down my spine. "Don't worry, I know who did it. I will be sure to give them my regards after they interrupted our precious day off together."

I had no sympathy for people who used others' weaknesses to shield themselves, especially not when they were the type that took advantage of children and had them do awful things. But for some reason, the beautiful smile on the prince's face made me wish I could give them one tiny piece of advice: run.

Chapter 3: The Prince's Concerns

Dammit, I thought, restraining the urge to click my tongue in annoyance for the dozenth time. I had no choice but to contain myself; every time I outwardly expressed my sour mood, the child in my arms would shrink in fear.

Why was I, Prince Christopher, heir to the throne of Sauslind, being forced to look after a child? I had ensured both hands would be free today for Eli, so why were they now being monopolized by some brat I didn't even know?

God, I really didn't understand why it had to come to this. Things had gone so smoothly at first.

Long ago Eli had mentioned the once-every-three-years market to me, adding sadly, "I want to go, but my father and the other members of the house have forbade me." I'd decided then that I would someday invite her along. It had taken until now for our relationship to progress far enough that I could do so.

Eli had hesitated over breaking her father's orders, but her eyes had shone with such joy at my proposal. When we actually arrived at the market, she'd been completely unable to hide her excitement, just as I'd anticipated. The innocent smile on her face had been adorable. So much so that I'd wanted to lock her away with me and spend the rest of the day as just the two of us.

Since the events with Lady Irene, whenever I tried to cozy up to her, she seemed disconcerted, a hint of anxiety flashing through her eyes. I figured it was because, although we had resolved her misunderstandings, she wasn't quite used to that level of affectionate skinship. That was precisely why I planned to spend today getting her accustomed to aspects of a romantic relationship. I could ease her anxiety that way and show her there was no need to worry.

Alas.

"Oh, Lady Elianna, over there, over there!" said Alan. "That's the *Rainbow's Prelude*, a song with a challenging dance rhythm."

"I don't doubt that. The outfits are terribly long, aren't they? Can they even dance in such clothing?" she asked.

"Little Lady, do you really not know anything about dance? Those clothes *are* the rainbow. That's the whole point of the dance."

"Oh, truly?" Her aqua gray eyes were round with surprise and overflowing with curiosity as she gazed at the corner of the market. The group of dancers had captivated her attention.

This whole scene irked me.

If things were as they should have been, *I* would be the one

walking beside her, holding her hand. *I* would be the one explaining various parts of the market to her, and her reverent gaze would be focused on *me*. How had Alan and some random brat stolen my position? Dammit, I didn't get it. The overwhelming urge to click my tongue was proving difficult to suppress.

Just moments ago, as I cradled the child in one arm, I'd tried to use my free hand to lace my fingers with hers, but she had refused me and retreated between the two guards accompanying us. I could tell her change in attitude had something to do with what that Paolo kid had said. It irritated me; there was no need for Eli to have to restrain herself.

It wasn't like holding this child in my arms—a child whose eyes so resembled mine—and having Eli beside me had given me any funny ideas, like picturing the two of us together in the future with a child of our own. Of course not. Preposterous. I would never entertain such fantasies.

Regardless, it didn't change how unamusing the situation was. Today it was supposed to be *my* role to protect Eli as her knight. When I told Glen I was taking him and some of his people along as well, he'd frantically wailed, "My squad's full of young recruits, people who still have futures ahead of them. And we both know you'll kill them if *anything* goes wrong!" Pfft, like that was my problem.

Once you tore Eli's interest away from books, her curiosity knew no bounds. Her eyes lit up in fascination over foreign tapestries and cursed masks. At one point she spotted an elaborate decoration hung at the back of one of the stalls. A customer and the shopkeeper were standing nearby, haggling over price when she commented, "Oh, this is a forgery of an item from the old empire." The complexion on both the shopkeeper and the customer's faces changed immediately. She also encountered a person claiming to be the descendant of a wizard and exposed the secret behind their illusions, causing interest (and subsequently their income) to dwindle. And she'd also struck a peddler speechless after they solicited her to sample their sweets and Eli replied, "Lala Tou means a spider's tail in Old Lacan."

I was also beginning to understand why the Bernsteins had such a complicated relationship with the Roma.

The boy Rene was happily munching away on one such spider's tail, his eyes trained on the dancers. I sighed inwardly, only to hear a strained clip of laughter as someone asked "Want to switch?" My childhood friend (Glen), three years my senior, had already guessed the reason as to why I was tolerating this child and had thus been open minded himself.



Moments ago during his report, Alan had teasingly said, “I didn’t realize you had a secret child, Lord Chris.”

Enough with the jokes already, I’d thought. What, is every kid out there with blue eyes suddenly my child now?

I’d made my distaste apparent as I said, “Age-wise, it would be more likely for him to be my uncle’s child than mine, now wouldn’t it?”

But Alan had nonchalantly replied, “Nah, Lord Theodore would definitely say, ‘I would never do something so foolish.’”

How vexing.

“He’s just putting on airs,” I’d said. I only wished he’d expose his true nature in front of Eli.

Alan and Glen had exchanged looks after I’d said that. What was their problem? If there was something they wanted to say, they should just say it.

“Blood runs thick,” Alan had remarked in defeat. He then furrowed his brows in careful thought and asked us what our plans were next.

Now I understood the gravity of the situation which had prompted Alan to go out of his way to hunt me down. The opposition was likely trying to sabotage a facility we had just begun constructing. Fortunately they were just a small fry and would be easy to corner.

The reason they had gone to such lengths to use Roma children was because even if you tried to use the children’s testimony, their credibility would be called into question due to their origin. And also because it would heighten the Roma’s suspicion and mistrust toward others.

Nobles really couldn’t be trusted.

If the culprit had used any other noble family’s name to accomplish their goals, they might have succeeded. The Roma weren’t receptive at all to royalty and high class nobility. But unfortunately for our saboteur, their plans had gone up in smoke thanks to the fact that they’d used the Bernstein name. From what Alan could gather, the Roma adults weren’t at all convinced that the Bernsteins would dip their hands in such foolishness as book thievery. The Bernsteins were famous even here for their love of books.

Yet when we tried to reach out to the Roma and broach the topic of their connection to the Bernsteins, their expressions turned bitter and their mouths clamped shut. Thus we were currently trying to make our way to the Stars of Thistle to look into the source of this connection and—

My thoughts were disrupted when suddenly I realized that the boy’s blue eyes were peering up at me, anxious over Glen’s offer to

switch. I found myself wondering if I, too, had looked so nervous at that age.

“Why don’t I tell you a little story from a long time ago?” I said.

Children were uniquely adorable in the way that they tilted their head. Granted, the situation would be even better (perfect, actually) if it were Eli contained in my arms instead, but alas.

“Long ago in some kingdom, there was a small boy with blue eyes. That boy spent each day filled with worry. His mother had caught a serious illness, and he wasn’t allowed to see her anymore.”

Rene’s eyes went round, blinking. The story was both similar to his own and different, which seemed to capture his interest. Looking into his blue eyes made me feel like I was talking to my past self.

“The two were separated, the boy’s mother taken far, far away so that her illness could be cured. For the longest time, they couldn’t see each other. The boy wrote so many letters to his mother, and every single day he prayed, ‘Please let my mom—*mother* get better.’ Then, when the boy turned twelve years old, his mother defeated her illness and returned to him. However...”

As I watched him listening in earnest, my expression turned serious. “His mother had become an entirely different person. She was no longer the kind, gentle woman she had been before she’d fallen ill. She’d become strict and cold, and she wouldn’t even smile at him anymore. The boy was hurt, and he may have even cried a little bit too. But then, he thought, ‘My mother must have had some magic cast on her by an evil wizard.’”

“The Roma’s shamans would never do such a thing,” the boy said reflexively, causing me to laugh and nod. Apparently even a child this small was sensitive to prejudice.

“The little boy wanted to undo the spell, so he studied hard every single day. But he couldn’t find a way, and he was losing his temper. That’s when a princess appeared and broke the spell.”

“A princess?”

I smiled at the boy, whose blue eyes were alight. I wanted to share those same emotions I’d experienced at the time.

Beside me, Glen mumbled, “...That’s one hell of an abridged version.”

Shut it.

“The princess was a library fairy. She knew all kinds of stories from books. Not only that, she’d read so many of them that she could even understand what the author of a book had been feeling when they wrote it. She also taught the boy a spell to break the magic on his mother.”

I continued, as the boy stared fixedly at me, and mimicked the words as she’d spoken them to me at the time. “That which is

precious to you cannot be seen.”

“That’s from *The Star Traveler*,” he remarked with excitement, and I nodded.

There was so much I could have seen back then if only I had cooled my head and looked around me. My mother had been gravely ill, and I was the only direct heir to the royal family. That must have put a lot of pressure on her. She had no other choice but to be strict with me, to ensure I was up to the task of being prince, of being someone who held the country on their shoulders—to make sure I was so superior that no one could question whether I was fit for the position or not.

“The boy realized that, just like in *The Star Traveler*, he had lost sight of what was truly precious to him. And then he found out that his strict mother had actually cherished all of his letters and treated them as her treasures. So the boy no longer felt sad anymore, not even when his mother was harsh with him. And he was incredibly grateful to the princess.”

The boy’s eyes sparkled, and I smiled at him.

“Incidentally,” I continued, keeping my voice to a hushed whisper, “after that, this nuisance appeared that tried to hide the princess away.”

“No way...”

“You have probably seen them before, since you’re Roma. To the very far east, they bake these pottery statues of an animal similar to a raccoon on two legs. On the surface they look really gentle... Not evil at all, just a bit comical. But just like the animal those statues represent, this nuisance couldn’t be cooked and eaten. They were just an utterly bothersome family of pests.”

“Hey now,” Glen said reproachfully.

I told you to shut it, Glen.

“What happened to the boy and the princess?” the boy asked anxiously.

I smiled gently. “The boy desperately tried to see the princess, but every single time, those pests got in his way. And those pests had also cast magic on the princess to make her forget the boy too.”

“Wow, you sure are making your own convenient interpretation of what happened,” said Glen.

Glen, if I have to grab your jaw and wrench it shut with my own two hands just to keep you quiet, I will do it.

The child’s eyes threatened to spill tears at any moment, so I broadened my smile at him reassuringly. “Don’t worry, the boy never gave up on the princess. He managed to steal her back from the pests. And the princess fell even more in love with the boy than she had been in the past and decided for herself to stay at his side.”

Glen continued to mumble in disagreement, this time covering his mouth with his hand, so I casually stomped my foot down on his. Then I looked back at the boy and his blue eyes. Although he'd convinced himself I was his father at first, it seemed he was beginning to realize his mistake, for gradually I noticed a spark of wisdom shining in his eyes.

"Rene," I said, "that which is precious to you cannot be seen.' You can't lose sight of what matters."

The boy's earnest eyes scrutinized me, as if trying to read into what I was saying, but then a hesitant voice called out, "Your Hi—I mean, Lord Chris?" It was the princess from the story (Eli), holding a small bag of sweets. "My apologies for purchasing things again even though I don't have money of my own, but...um, I thought little Rene might enjoy this."

Eli often had people press sweets upon her because of her feminine appearance, even though she disliked them. I'd heard how she struggled at the tea parties and such as a result.

Paolo had already casually outstretched his hand to take some sweets. Eli and Rene looked over at me questioningly, so I smiled and nodded. Eli's eyes softened as she watched Rene outstretch his hand.

I felt a bit unsettled about the whole thing. She didn't need *my* permission to give the boy anything. *Don't tell me she actually thinks this is my kid?* I thought, a cold sweat forming despite the smile on my face.

This was Eli we were talking about. Most likely she was just surprised at everything that was happening and going with the flow. At least that was how it appeared, but sometimes her thoughts went off in odd directions—directions neither I nor those around me could anticipate.

If she nonchalantly asked, "Your Highness, are you truly his father?" I'm not sure I could recover from such a blow. I waved off the unpleasant idea and drew her attention. "Eli?"

Her dreamy aqua gray eyes looked up at me. My heart filled with emotion every time I looked at them. Long ago it had required an enormous amount of effort on my part to call out to her and turn her gaze my way.

"Can I have one too?" I asked.

"What? Oh, certainly." She looked confused when I then nodded my head at my hands to signal that they were too occupied for me to take the treat myself. "Hm?" Her aqua gray eyes fluttered.

I gave her a meaningful look, and she at last seemed to infer what I was getting at, because her cheeks went bright red. I cherished her blushing reaction, as it was something she'd only recently (finally) begun to do.

Her eyes wavered as she hesitated, but then she gingerly took the soft baked sweet between her fingers and held it out toward me. I leaned forward without hesitating, wrapping my mouth around the confection *and* her finger. When it became clear I was savoring the taste of her fingers rather than the treat itself, Eli became as flustered as I'd predicted.

"M-M-My finger isn't something to eat!"

I ignored her protest and licked at her dainty finger, giving it a light, playful nip before letting go. It only encouraged my mischievous behavior to see her flushed cheeks and how she froze.

"Really? But they're so sweet and delicious." I was satisfied; now that she was at a loss for words, her thoughts wouldn't be able to wander in odd directions, and there would be no risk of her voicing them.

Nearby I heard Paolo say, "I...think I just lost my appetite for sweets."

"You won't get any sympathy from me," said Glen. "We have to put up with seeing this every day."

"Yeah, I bet you guys have to pile on the spice when you eat just to get rid of the sugary sweet aftertaste of seeing all that."

They continued their (irrelevant) conversation, to which I had but one thing to say: the hell if I care.

We left that spot and gradually distanced ourselves from the marketplace, heading into the Roma's residential area. A couple of men stood in our way, citing a harsh restriction against outsiders. Even with two Roma children present, they were still being very obviously exclusionist, particularly since it was clear we were from Sauslind and of a different race.

"What do you want?" one of the men asked intimidatingly.

Reluctantly, I gave him a name. "Could you inform Dr. Nikola Rezzi that I'm here to collect on his debt to me from six years ago? He'll know what that means."

The man suspiciously echoed, "A debt from six years ago?" He could tell by merely glancing at me that starting a fight wouldn't be wise. "Not trying to trick us, are you?" he asked, even as he turned away to fulfill my request. After a few minutes, he reappeared from the shadow of a covered wagon, pulling an older man along with him.

"A golden-haired knight, ya said? Pfft, I've never met such a man like that in my life. Though I've had as many people treat me to a drink as there are stars in the sky, so that kinda debt wouldn't be surprising. Gahaha!" The elder man, with his thick, vulgar voice approached. He looked as though he were in his mid-sixties and far too skinny. Just as he suggested, the stench of alcohol hung thick around him, and his cheeks were ruddy, a bottle of liquor hanging

from his hand. His eyes, intense, fixed us with a stare.

Eli and the others widened their eyes in surprise. And while I knew I shouldn't let a sigh slip, it was difficult to contain.

"The same as ever, I see, drunk old Mister Rezzi."

His eyes watched me suspiciously. "What's this now?" he replied, sounding amused. "You that green, inexperienced boy from before? Come for another life lesson, hm? Also when'd ya get so many Roma kids, eh? You start workin' on making them right after I met ya last?"

I felt my temple twitch. This is *exactly* why I'd gone to such great lengths to avoid meeting this old man. And Eli, why was she giving me such a chilly look and trying to distance herself?

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I was fifteen when I first met Dr. Nikola Rezzi. It was back then that I was officially recognized as heir to the throne, and with it came a troublesome issue I had to wrack my brain over—the issue of my engagement.

Up until that point, numerous ladies from powerful noble houses within Sauslind had been offered up as candidates, but I had skillfully and discreetly nipped each one in the bud before they had the opportunity to gain traction. The other nobles didn't look favorably upon the fact that I had been recognized as heir yet had no official fiancée, and before I could preemptively run interference, the next candidate turned out to be someone quite formidable.

The girl was the first princess of the Miseral Dukedom, a maritime nation to the southwest and the birth country of my grandmother on my mother's side. We were only distantly related, and thanks to ceremonies between the two countries, we had met a number of times already.

She was touted as the Pearl Princess, the pride of the Miseral Dukedom, and her beautiful appearance matched that reputation. She was modest and graceful, quick-witted, and skilled at building a man's confidence without being too intrusive. Truly the picture of the ideal princess. We were only one year apart in age as well, which prompted those around me to hound me over what I could possibly be dissatisfied about with her.

I, myself, couldn't easily come up with a rebuttal. I barely managed to evade their interrogative questions with the pretense that using marriage to further solidify our relationship with a nation after we'd already done such in my parents' generation (via my mother's marriage to my father) could cause conflict with one of our neighboring countries.

Back then, I was always irritable. I felt a restlessness I couldn't redirect anywhere. Elianna had been dragged back to her family's

territory, and each time I requested permission to see her, I was denied. If I tried to send a letter, they would respectfully refuse the envelope before it even reached her, saying, “We couldn’t possibly accept private correspondence from the royal family,” and the messenger would be sent right back to me.

Still, I remained undiscouraged and sent some of my subordinates to infiltrate the Bernstein’s house and gather information. Thus ensued a war beneath the surface—me vs. the retired marquess (Eli’s grandfather) and the current marquess (her father)—one so fierce that the ripples it caused could be felt on the surface above, disturbing any swans that might have otherwise been gliding there.

Under ordinary circumstances, it wouldn’t have been unusual for my father to utilize his authority and the heavy fist of the government to push things in my favor. However, while both he and the prime minister had been panicked in the beginning, they gradually began to watch the developments in silent amusement. In the end, my father even told me, “The day you manage to outwit Sauslind’s Brain is the day my retirement will be fast at hand,” making it clear he was calculating something using his son’s wishful love in the process.

It was already typical for someone my age to distrust adults, but that only heightened my doubt toward them. “Don’t you think they’re being utterly immature?!” Back then I had gone to my uncle Theodore to voice my complaints. Alexei (who was three years older than me) was studying diplomacy abroad; Glen was at the lower rungs of the military, doing training in some other territory; and I hadn’t met Alan yet. The only people left around me were those obsessively fixated on the power that came with being the next king.

My only saving grace at the time was my memories of Elianna from three years prior, *before* she was ripped away from me. Yet even on that front I was being mercilessly thwarted and couldn’t even get to her. She was twelve by then and hadn’t yet made her societal debut, but it wasn’t as though we were too far apart in age to be a match. Plus, I was a prince; there should have been no issue with our engagement. Yet when I tried to conduct a bridal inspection in the land neighboring the Bernstein’s territory, they would catch wind of it somehow and use whatever method at their disposal to have the location of the inspection moved to the opposite end of the land.

Word of my potential engagement with the girl from the Miseral Dukedom should have been kept between the senior statesmen and gone no further down the grapevine, but for some reason it had become the main topic of gossip for low-ranking officials. To add further fuel to the fire, those sly-faced tanuki had even feigned ignorance by approaching me to say, “Congratulations on your engagement, Your Highness.” I shouldn’t have to tell you that behind

my taut smile, I was secretly sharpening a blade to cut down those annoying (Bernsteins) pests.

At first, my uncle merely stifled his laughter when I rattled off my complaints to him in his private room in the royal archives, but suddenly he turned serious and said, "Chris, aren't you just being obstinate about this?"

Yes, I knew that already. They'd kept hindering me, so of course part of it was that I was getting stubborn. I honestly did think that Marquess Bernstein and his family were being incredibly immature, but I also realized that becoming engaged to royalty meant an end to a person's future and their potential. I also understood that was exactly why the marquess and his ilk were trying to separate me from Eli while they still could. They figured it was merely young love that would fade with time.

"You don't particularly have any issues with the princess from Miseral, do you? Isn't it about time you moved on from your childish obsession?"

He didn't have to tell me that. As a member of the royal family, I knew I had an inescapable duty to marry for political gain. Engaging myself to the princess of Miseral would solidify my position as crown prince, and I was sure the two of us could build a relationship of respect for one another as well. Obsessing over Eli was nothing more than pure selfishness. And yet, still, I couldn't give up.

"I can never feel the same for her as I do for Eli," I said.

Eli had been the one to smooth over the discord between my mother and me. I fell for her because her way of thinking differed so greatly from my own. I could tack on any number of excuses, but more than anything, the feelings I had for Eli weren't something I could ever have for someone else.

My uncle gave a strained smile, troubled by my immaturity.

Suffocated by all the pent-up anger I felt, I gave my guards the slip and took only my long-serving chamberlain with me as I set out on a long trip on horseback. It was then that I spotted the Roma's market and felt my memories with Eli come rushing back.

I was so desperate to get to know her back when we first met that our encounters were repetitive trial and error on my part, during the course of which I discovered her distaste for sweets. I had the admittedly childish notion that I might surprise her with a frog, but I gave up on the idea after I found her one day snatching up a grasshopper that had wandered in and setting it free outside.

"Elianna, is there anywhere you'd like to go visit?" I had asked, desperate to draw her attention toward me and away from books. I was determined for the two of us to venture out together and go somewhere other than a library.

In a rare display, she'd actually shared her own desire with me, saying, "I would like to go to the book market." Specifically, the book market held by the Stars of Thistle once every three years. She went on to say that she wanted to at least see it once.

"Then let's go. You can go with me!" I'd exclaimed, bravely inviting her.

But Eli had shook her head sadly. "My father and the rest of our house say I'm forbidden to go." Then she'd explained, "My brother secretly went there before, and now father's prohibition has become even stricter. He says we mustn't approach the Roma."

"Why not?" I'd asked, but even Eli hadn't seemed to know the answer. And I was forced to realize that, at the time, my invitation didn't carry enough incentive for her to break her father's orders.

So when I saw the market myself, curiosity bubbled within me. I ignored the disapproving look from the chamberlain, left my horse behind and stepped into the market. That was where I met the drunk Mister Rezzi. I saw him getting in a squabble with some nobles and couldn't stand by, so I stepped in to help. Then, for reasons beyond my understanding, he dragged a young boy like me to a pub and began guzzling alcohol.

At first I didn't think this drunk old man could possibly be one of the Stars of Thistle. It was only upon talking to him that I discovered he was no mere alcoholic and was a veritable well of knowledge. When I asked his name, I was shocked. He had the same name as the author of one of my textbooks.

"It can't be..." I blurted out, aghast.

Mister Rezzi snorted with laughter. "You sure are a green little chick. The world you live in is still far too narrow, fixed by all kinds of stiff notions. That's why that girl's father, or tanuki as you call 'im, is doing so well at shuttin' ya down."

The truth of his words made me grit my teeth in frustration. "How can I win?"

"Pfft, hell if I know. What kinda man are ya if ya can't use yer own strength to take back a girl or two that ya like? Just makes ya a cowardly, spineless chick."

Here I was a prince and he was getting in all the low blows he could at me. Granted, I hadn't revealed myself, so it wasn't as if I particularly wanted the old man to pay me respect or anything.

As I continued grinding my teeth, the old man sniffed and said something very appropriate of the Roma. "There's a saying about stars aligning. One day, you and that girl's stars will align...isn't somethin' I can say for sure, I'm no astrologian. But shouldn't a young, green chick like you be usin' the time ya got now to get stronger so you're ready when that time comes?"

That made me revise my opinion of the man. Maybe he was actually capable of giving decent advice to a youth in need. And at the same time, I could feel that sense of impatience I'd been carrying ease.

Everyone thought my feelings for Eli were nothing more than young love—a childish obsession that would fade to mere memory in time. I even found myself conflicted, walled in between two sides: a side of me that wondered if they weren't right, that I was just being swept along and these feelings would eventually disappear, and a side of me that held so stubbornly to my emotions for her. This was the first time anyone had told me it was okay not to give up my fixation on her, and with that, the storm of irritation quieted as well. At least I was calm and could consider what I needed to do.

Right now I couldn't win against those old tanuki with their hidden name. Instead, I needed to accumulate power for when the opportunity arose, so that the next time we met, we wouldn't be ripped apart again. And this time, I wouldn't fail to catch hold of her.

Now that my mind was made up, I turned down the engagement with the princess of the Miseral Dukedom in no uncertain terms. And, on the surface at least, I resisted trying to meet with Eli anymore so those tanuki would have no more reason than necessary to be wary of me. Granted, I was still receiving information about Eli all the time behind closed doors.

Two more years passed after that as I waited for her to debut into high society, my carefully prepared trap set and ready—ahem, I mean, with the groundwork prepared so that I could successfully install her as my fiancée. Those tenacious tanuki still forced some conditions upon me in return, but I figured it would be no problem to fulfill them now that I was mounting political power. At the time, I could never have dreamed that Eli had forgotten about me completely.

Incidentally, Nikola Rezzi took every penny I had on me that day to pay for his alcohol, on the pretense that he was giving me “life lessons.” Seeing my high class attire, he figured I was a noble he could weasel some money out of.

That day served to reinforce a lesson I had already learned before: don't trust adults.

Chapter 4: The Infuriated Princess

I tilted my head at the mention of “life lessons,” and the elderly man who called himself Dr. Rezzi turned his quirky eyes my way and scrutinized me. “Hm. You that girl this little boy chick here was so desperate to steal back from those tanuki? Wanna hear some old stories about him? If ya wanna cover my drinking costs, I’ll be happy to tell ya some stories about ’em, some fact, some fiction.”

Some fact, some fiction? Tanuki? I blinked at the strange string of words.

His Highness cut in front of me. “Either type of story would be entirely unnecessary, Mister Rezzi. And don’t you dare try to sponge off Eli too.”

“What, now that your body’s gotten big, so has your attitude? Ah, or could it be ya just don’t want me tellin’ the girl ya like half-truths about ya so you’re actin’ all tough?”

“As if you would have anything more than tall tales to share with her anyways!”

Your Highness, you seem to be losing your composure a bit.

The old man merely cackled at the prince’s aggravation, which prompted Lord Alan to mutter, “This guy could get along perfectly with Prince Theodore.”

“Um... Are you one of the Stars of Thistle?” I asked. “My name is Elianna...um, just Elianna.” I hesitated over whether to use my family’s name or not. Paolo didn’t seem to realize as much, but nearly all adults knew that I was the betrothed of Sauslind’s crown prince. If I gave my own identity away, that would be the equivalent of revealing His Highness as well.

The old man expressed an altogether different interest as he peered over at me. “Young lady, have we met...” he began to mumble just before the prince cut in.

“At any rate, Mister Rezzi, I have something to ask. I would like you to take us to the Roma’s chief.”

“The chief, you say? What’s some Sauslind knight want with the chief? Gonna go in with your fists swingin’?”

I could immediately feel the seething hostility from the Roma men around us. In reaction, the two guards who had accompanied us were already reaching for their swords, but Lord Glen stayed their hands.

A sigh echoed from the prince. “No fighting, just talking. I actually had another matter to inquire about already, so this is the perfect opportunity to run some things by him. Be my go-between and think of it as repayment for mooching money off of me for alcohol

before.”

The old man proceeded to mumble under his breath, “I only remember moochin’ off ya one time, this doesn’t seem like a fair exchange.”

But the prince ignored him and instead lowered Rene to the ground, patting the boy on the head as he said, “Rene, go on back to your mother. We’ll join up with you later.” Rene’s eyes wavered anxiously, but he gave a sharp nod. Although their time together had been short, a bond had already formed between the boy and His Highness.

My heart was feeling a bit heavy for some reason as I asked the prince, “Your Hi—Lord Chris, how did you become acquainted with one of the Stars of Thistle?”

“Huh? Oh... Well, you know. Things happened a long time ago,” he responded ambiguously, smiling. Was it something he couldn’t tell me about? “Let’s go, Eli,” he said as he reached to grab my hand.

I immediately pulled away.

“Eli?”

“Um... I believe I will go along with Rene. Your Hi—ahem, Lord Chris, please go on without me and do what you must.” It should have been my responsibility to deal with the matter since it involved my house, and yet I was being obstinate about putting distance between us.

I gave a small curtsy, then took Rene’s hand and left. A voice called out behind me in surprise, but for some reason, I couldn’t bring myself to stay by His Highness’s side right now. Ever since we came to the Roma market, I had been surprised to find all these new sides to the prince that I’d never seen before. But as I saw those glimpses into his past, a past I knew nothing about, an indescribable anxiety seized me.

I could never know everything there was to know about another human being. Both His Highness and I had been born and raised in different environments. The reason I felt so despondent even now wasn’t simply because I wanted to know everything about the prince; I was just hit with this realization that there was *so much* I didn’t know about him, and it was overwhelming. At the root of all that anxiety was the fact that I still didn’t recall how we’d met all those years ago, which resulted in a lack of confidence in myself.

His Highness sighed in resignation as he watched me go and ordered the two guards to follow after me.

“Lady Elianna,” called Lord Alan, hurrying up behind me. “I’m afraid I won’t be able to accompany you as I’ve been given a task of my own, so please make sure to stay close to your guards.”

“Very well.”

Lord Alan gave a strained smile as he continued, "Please don't keep everything bottled up. If you're feeling anxious, make sure to share that with Lord Chris. If you don't, Glen will continue to receive the brunt of his outbursts and go bald before we know it." Lord Alan delivered that teasing remark before inviting Paolo to set off with him.

As I watched them go, Rene looked up at me. "Miss?" His voice was quiet, hesitant. A voice soon joined by others.

"Rene? Psst, Rene." It was a couple of children, with solemn looks on their faces as they appeared from the shadow of some bushes, beckoning Rene with a wave of the hand.

He kept a tight grip on my hand as he approached them, pulling me along. The others cautiously darted away when he did. I followed their gaze and realized it was the two guards unsettling them, so I instructed the two to maintain their distance. Neither looked terribly pleased by my order, but at least without them nearby, the children were willing to approach.

"Rene, didn't you guys get caught?"

"Where'd Paolo go? Weren't you two together?"

The other boys, about the same age as Rene, pelted him with question after question. Apparently they were the comrades that had helped him and Paolo steal those books before.

"Well," Rene began to answer in a cheerful voice, "actually some nice man helped us, so I'm all right now. He said he'd take care of my mommy, too." His Highness had made such a promise earlier, after we left the eatery.

But as soon as he told them, the other children exchanged dark looks. "Rene... We want you to stay calm and listen. Earlier, after we watched you get taken by those noble-looking people, we went and waited for that mole noble and told him to stuff it. We wouldn't follow his orders anymore since you guys got caught."

"And then," the children continued, with awkward glances at Rene as if they were struggling to find the words, "that mole noble creep suddenly started panicking when he heard that the people who caught you guys weren't Roma. He told us not to say anything unnecessary and just tell anyone who asked that he's a Bernstein. And even though he was supposed to take your mom to a doctor, after that he just locked her up in that mansion!"

"What...?"

"Sounds crazy, right? He was getting ready to burn the books too, saying he had to get rid of the evidence. We came back because we thought we should at least talk to the chief about what we saw."

"We're sorry, Rene," said another, "for not being able to protect Marissa."

Rene had gone pale, and I was just as shocked from what I had

heard, my body trembling as I repeated, “Burn the books...?”

I had no doubt that this man had taken Rene’s mother as a hostage to keep them from saying anything that might be compromising for him. But to top that off, the man was planning something as barbaric as burning books to get rid of evidence?! He couldn’t even be considered human anymore. He was less than an animal—no, he wasn’t even that! This was the act of a fiend!

“Where is he? Where is this noble at?!” My menacing inquiry made the boys tremble in fear.



“I’ll show you the way!” Rene grabbed my hand and pulled me along. I followed without bothering to look back.

“Lady Elianna...?!” the guards exclaimed in surprise, but their voices were soon drowned out by shouts from the Roma children. The latter were wary of any non-Roma adults and were therefore acting as a decoy to obstruct the guards’ pursuit. I had been an exception apparently, recognized as a comrade because I’d been holding hands with Rene.

As much as I wanted to explain to the guards what was happening, I thought it more important we rush in there as quickly as possible to stop those books from going up in flames. The urgency of the situation had left me no time to consider my options.

We dove into the depths of the forest, close to where the Roma’s residential area was located, and it took no more than a couple of minutes for us to locate an abandoned mansion. The place must have been a noble’s private estate once; its exterior had fallen to ruin, but the overall structure of the building remained. Several men were gathered at the corner of the courtyard, an enormous pile of books at their feet. Judging by the atmosphere around them, those books might be burnt to a crisp at any moment, and I felt my entire body begin to shake.

Although I was short of breath from all the running we had done to get here, I still had the energy to jump forward and yell, “Stop right there!”

The men looked back, surprised at my intrusion. One among them, a man dressed like a noble, looked familiar to me.

Angrily, I thundered, “What you’re doing is absolutely barbaric, Baron Mole!”

“It’s Maudsley, not mole!” he snapped back reflexively.

In the first place, it was rare for me to attend events for the nobility. On occasions when I did, I never left His Highness’s side. So I only knew the man by his face, not by his name. And frankly, his name was utterly irrelevant at the moment anyway.

“Even an animal wouldn’t burn books,” I declared. “This behavior is absolutely inexcusable. You’re worse than a cockroach. Have some shame!”

“D-Did you say ‘a cockroach’...?”

My barrage of verbal abuse must have taken him by surprise. The baron flinched at my words, but I had no intention of taking them back.

“It’s clear now that you were the one abusing my house’s good name and manipulating the Roma children into book thieves. At least have the courage to admit your crimes and release Rene’s mother to

us. If you are prompt, we may be able to show you some leniency,” I said.

The baron’s face went stiff as he spat back, “Your sudden arrival left me aghast, Lady Elianna. Pardon me for saying as much, but aren’t you merely imagining things? Or do you actually entertain the tall tales of children? And *Roma* at that. Wandering savages. Honest to God, I can scarcely believe that you—the betrothed of the crown prince—would involve yourself with that ilk and allow them to mislead you with their lies. This certainly is a troubling situation.” Gradually his lips began to curl into a greasy grin.

Undaunted, I replied, “Very well, then how would you like to explain those books there?”

“I purchased these myself,” the baron insisted. “Whatever I do with my belongings is my decision to make. I have no obligation to listen to your commands, no matter how much people refer to you as the ‘Bibliophile Princess.’”

“He’s lying!” blurted Rene. “He’s the one who ordered us to go steal those books. He’s the one who claimed to be a Bernstein!”

“And who would be daft enough to entertain the babblings of a wandering savage? And only a child at that. It certainly won’t be considered proper testimony. If you try to use that child’s words to spearhead your crusade against me, I’m afraid you will only damage your own reputation in the process.” His slimy gaze fixated on me. “How about we make an agreement, Lady Elianna?”

“An agreement?” I furrowed my brows.

The baron continued with an explanation, acting as if this were the most brilliant proposal ever. “I will keep it a secret that you, the betrothed of the crown prince, mingle among that disgusting *Roma* rabble. And in return, I would like you to immediately suspend your plans for that ridiculous facility. It’s simply unfathomable to me; thanks to the budget for that project, we’ve let business negotiations with the Bass firm slip right between our fingers. Do you realize that right now the Bass firm is embarking on a brand new line of weapon production?!”

His body leaned forward as gushed enthusiastically, “Our kingdom should establish a monopoly on that *before* they hand their goods over to another country! This is for the sake of our country’s future. That’s what you should be considering right now, Lady Elianna, rather than catering to those lowlives.”

Not a word of that made a lick of sense.

Everything that Baron Mole—pardon, *Maudsley*—said sounded like little more than incoherent babble to me. But there was one thing he mentioned that caught my interest. “Baron Maudsley, if we are to consider our kingdom’s future, we should utilize our budget not for

the development of weapons with which to kill people, but for books and research on how to heal those who are ill. Our ancestors said it best. 'Where they burn books, they will, in the end, burn human beings too.' That's not a route I think Sauslind should take. Thus, I must refuse your proposition."

His face flushed with anger. "You speak so cunningly for someone who hides behind His Highness's authority as if it were a shield. It seems I have no other choice but to force you to fulfill my request." The baron's private troops all unsheathed their swords at his signal.

I'd already lifted Rene up in my arms protectively and began inching back as they approached with their weapons raised.

"Enough," rang a frigid voice.

The moment the owner of that voice appeared, the entire area came to a standstill. The baron hung his mouth open in confused disbelief, his troops frozen in place by the intruder's glare.

This "intruder" was none other than the composed-looking prince, with Lord Glen and the guards at his side. Close by, I could also see the silhouettes of the children who must have guided them here.

"P-Prince Christopher...! W-Why are you here?!" The baron's voice hitched in confusion.

His Highness smiled curtly. "Come now, Baron Maudsley, you couldn't have honestly believed I would let Eli walk into a dangerous situation like this all alone."

"I-I haven't done anything! Your Highness, I implore you not to lend your ear to those Roma children! They're wanderers who owe allegiance to no kingdom—a filthy lot who could turn on Sauslind at any given moment. As our wise prince, surely you must trust the word of someone like myself, a noble loyal to the kingdom, over rabble like them!"

"Leaving your protestations aside for the moment," said the prince in a biting cold voice. His brilliant blue eyes fixed the baron with a chilling glare. "The biggest issue right now is the situation in which we currently find ourselves, with *your* troops holding their swords out at *my* fiancée."

The baron started at the prince's words, panicked. He looked even further backed into a corner now than he had a moment ago.

"It seems you also treat the Roma with derision, but one of my acquaintances is Roma *and* one of the Stars of Thistle. It is my duty to listen with impartiality to what he has to say as well." His Highness gave the signal, and Lord Glen and the other guards moved to apprehend the baron and his private troops.

Baron Maudsley wailed in protest, like a child throwing a temper tantrum. "You're naive, Prince Christopher! You don't even understand what's necessary for our kingdom!"

“Ah yes, I did forget to say one thing.” His Highness gave a menacing grin. “About the weapon development that the Bass firm is launching, the one you praised so highly. It appears they were tragically deceived. They put an old man on the project they claimed was ‘second to none when it comes to weapon development,’ but when they actually made the weapons based on that man’s blueprints, they were all useless and defective. Bass failed to notice and mass produced the weapons anyway, regrettably resulting in bankruptcy. That same old man then ran off on them after charging up an exorbitant bill for alcohol. Some elderly men out there certainly can prove to be quite troublesome. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“No, that couldn’t possibly...!” That story seemed to be the final blow on the baron. He put up no more resistance and instead looked like a soulless shell.

“What’s this?” A carefree voice filtered in. It was Lord Alan, together with Paolo and the capital’s mobile patrol force in tow. “Oh. The arrest has already concluded? I don’t get any stage time?”

“You’re late,” said the prince sharply.

Lord Alan fussed back quietly, “I actually hurried as quickly as I could.”

“Eli.” His Highness turned toward me and approached.

I recoiled in surprise. He had warned me plenty of times, and yet I had gone off on my own anyway. I couldn’t help but wonder if he was disappointed or cross with me.

“Good God,” he said with a sigh, reaching his hand out to draw me close, gently wrapping his arms around me. The feel of his warmth and the rhythm of his pulse at my ear made my heart pound as well. “I really can’t take my eyes off of you. There aren’t many princesses out there that would charge in to face the villain without their prince.” He laughed in amusement and added, “You really haven’t changed at all.”

Timidly, I ventured, “Um, are you not angry with me?”

His brow quirked. “Do I look angry?” His serious blue eyes stared back at me, and I could tell for certain that he was.

Before I could apologize, Paolo cut in. “Rene!” The boy in question was currently sandwiched in between my arms and the prince’s. “Marissa’s inside this mansion. Let’s go! She’ll be worried if you don’t go see her.” His Highness and I watched the children take off running, and we soon joined hands and followed.

Chapter 5: That Which Is Precious, That Which Can't Be Seen

We found a woman resting upon a simple bed in one of the rooms. Rene recognized her and immediately raced toward her. "Mommy!"

The face of the Roma woman was so visibly emaciated that even someone with no medical knowledge like me could tell she was deeply ill. She looked up at the sound of her child's voice and struggled to give him a reassuring smile. My heart panged at the familiar sight, which brought back memories of my past.

Rene stared back at his mother, fighting back the urge to cry as he told her, "I met a knight from Sauslind, an amazing one with the same blue eyes as me. I thought he was my daddy at first."

"Rene..."

"He told me an old story about a blue-eyed boy and a princess. That princess taught the boy a spell to get rid of the magic that had been cast on his mommy. 'That which is precious to you cannot be seen.'"

It was a quote from *The Star Traveler*. My mother had read it to me when I was young, but I didn't recall there being a story about a blue-eyed boy and a princess in that book. There was something about that description that tickled at my memories, as if I'd had the same conversation as that princess with someone in my past...

Rene wiped his tears away with his sleeve the moment they started beading up, then he forced a smile for his mother. "I'm always pestering you to tell me stories about daddy. I know that's why you came up with the story of the female dancer and the Sauslind knight. But actually, I...I'd already realized the truth. That daddy's...not coming back."

His mother's eyes trembled with concern, but Rene reached out and grasped her hand tightly in his smaller one. "The knight told me that I can't lose sight of what's precious to me. So I won't run from the truth, I'll be just like the traveler in the book. I'm a Roma after all, and the blood of Stars of Thistle, the blood of those who search tirelessly for the truth, runs through me."

Aha, I thought, feeling as if one of the suspicions I'd long held had been resolved.

Rene's mother lovingly embraced him in her arms. My chest burned hot with emotion as I watched, reminded of my own now-deceased mother.

His Highness gently called out to the boy and smiled warmly when the two looked his way. "Sauslind began construction on a new

facility just ten days ago. It's to be a free medical treatment facility for the poor, staffed by healers and doctors alike, and it will be jointly used as an institution that specializes in medical research. The government will be overseeing this facility directly, so I guarantee the people employed there will have proper skill and technique. Roma like yourself have also been approved to use it as you wish."

"Really?!" Rene's eyes lit up.

"No joke?" echoed a shocked Paolo.

I, myself, was filled with both surprise and delight at the news.

Then His Highness continued, his next words utterly unbelievable. "The government will be overseeing it, but the supervisor is Elianna Bernstein. I am sure it will be difficult for you to trust nobility after the ordeal you just went through, but at least Eli is someone you can put your faith in, right?"

Excuse me, what?

"Your Hi—pardon, um, what in heavens are you talking about?" I asked.

"The free medical treatment facility."

No, that wasn't the part I was asking about.

The prince merely grinned at my bewilderment. "You're the one who originally proposed the idea. There's no need to actually be present and conduct business on site, but bear in mind the project has your name on it. When I spoke of it to the Roma's chief a bit ago, the Stars of Thistle expressed interest in collaborating as well. I hope you'll borrow their knowledge and strive diligently with the rest of our staff to further our medical research."

I had no idea where to start with my questions or how, so instead my mouth just hung wide open.

The prince chuckled as he shared the origin of his idea, explaining that the two of us had spoken of it long ago when we first met.

One day, when we were younger, as I was immersing myself in books in the library, he asked me, "Why do you like books so much?" Apparently he was sweating inwardly at the time, debating how he should respond if I answered with either, "It runs in my blood," or "Why not? There's plenty lying around."

Instead I looked up from my reading and, after a bit of thought, glanced around at the gaps between the bookshelves. "I'm searching for my mother."

"Your mother?"

"Yes. My mother passed away three years ago. I have barely any memories of her. So I read the books that she used to love and wonder to myself what it was she so liked about them. Books such as...well, such as war chronicles. I read them and wonder, what would my

mother have thought of this book? What did the author think as they wrote it? Then I reflect sadly on the people who must have perished in that war—how painful their wounds must have been. And I think how I wouldn't want to experience the same. When I'm reading, it feels like a conversation between the author, my mother, and myself." I stroked the cover of the book in my hands as I spoke.

Then I added, "I also can't help but search to see if maybe there was actually a way we could have healed my mother back then. I wish there was a library made of doctors just as there are libraries made of books."

"A library made of doctors?" His Highness asked in surprise.

I then glanced across the shelves of books once more. "We're told the knowledge and techniques of doctors and healers are of such high import. Books have been likewise valued since long ago. The people of the past would have never believed we would make libraries as we have now. If we had a library made of doctors just like that, we might be able to find cures for difficult illnesses. That way maybe there would be fewer people like me—fewer people who have to cry and mourn at the loss of their mother."

Once again, the prince was left shocked as I displayed a completely different way of thinking than his. He was too preoccupied with his own situation to think of anything else, glad that his own mother's illness had been cured. I, however, had approached the situation from a separate angle, taking the feelings of others like me into account as I proposed a solution.

That encounter, His Highness informed me, was what made him realize how narrow his viewpoint had been.

"Surely I didn't..." I started to protest, certain he was exaggerating.

But the prince smiled and shook his head, gently squeezing my hand in his. "I fell for the way you came up with ideas I couldn't and how you empathized with others who were hurt and mourning. It has taken almost ten years for me to collect and equip people with the necessary medical and healing knowledge, but finally your dream is being realized, Eli. A library made of doctors."

I was struck speechless, once again overwhelmed with emotion. His Highness was always treasuring the memories of our past and connecting them to our future. Memories that I felt pathetic for not being able to recall.

"Two months ago we began updating the medical resources in the Krug Region, and that's partly what helped launch all of this. It seems that was why Baron Maudsley was masquerading as a Bernstein. No one in Sauslind would dare believe that a Bernstein would steal books.

But he probably hoped that it would work with the Roma and deepen their mistrust toward the nobility, thereby damaging the reputation of the medical facility. But, as you know, your family is already infamous among the Roma for a very different reason, so the baron miscalculated.”

I see, I thought, realizing how the puzzle pieces fit together. The baron must have hoped that tarnishing the Bernstein name would ruin the plans for the facility.

Suddenly I remembered there was still one mystery we hadn’t yet solved. However, before I could voice my question, a dejected Paolo cut in, “What the heck, Little Lady? You said you weren’t sure if you’d call yourself his lover, but it’s painfully clear you guys are really passionate for each other.”

Immediately, the prince’s eyes began to gleam. “Oh? Did you really say that, Eli?”

“Um...you see...” I backed away, as if trying to retreat. A futile attempt, considering our hands were still linked.

“Well?”

I couldn’t escape his gaze. But then I remembered what Lord Alan had said to me before.

“Eli, tell me. Why are you so unsure?” His voice was so gentle that I felt all the more ridiculous. For some reason I almost felt like bursting out in tears.

I hesitated, but finally began to voice the anxiety I’d been carrying with me. “I... For days now, it has weighed on me. I can’t remember—I can’t recall when we met.”

“Eli...”

“I feel terrible, especially seeing how much Your Highness has treasured those memories...” Was I really allowed to call myself his lover when I’d forgotten our past? I clamped my mouth shut and choked back tears. Then I dropped my gaze to my feet. In the very next instant, I heard a cry of delight and laughter from the prince as he pulled me tightly into his arms. I looked up, breathless with surprise, and he planted his lips on my forehead. “Y-Y-Your Hi—”

People are watching, Your Highness!

“Eli! Elianna!” He spun me around in a circle. This was the happiest I had ever seen the prince, though I wasn’t entirely sure what had triggered this sudden change of mood.

Lord Alan and the others stood at the entrance of the room, exchanging looks as they said, “She broke him.”

“Eli, I’m so happy! I’ve never been this happy in my life. I never dreamed you were working so hard to try to remember our past!”

Pardon, Your Highness, but if you might allow me a question...what on earth is that supposed to mean?

I was utterly dumbfounded as His Highness fawned and fussed. Yet for some reason his positive mood was influencing mine, and my heart gradually felt lighter. Just how trivial had all of my anxiety been if he was this ready to accept me despite my poor memory? In fact, this whole situation had been yet another lesson in speaking candidly about my feelings with him in the future.

“What, so that was all it was, Little Lady?” Paolo interjected once more. “You were anxious because you’d forgotten your past with him? You know, all you gotta do is kiss once and you’ll remember.”

Oh goodness, did he just say what I think he said?

“That’s how the story goes, right? The prince just has to kiss the princess to break the spell on her,” Paolo said teasingly. He and the prince exchanged looks, grinning at each other.

“Well, you heard what he said, Eli. Why don’t we give it a try?”

My face immediately lit up, hot enough that steam threatened to rise from my cheeks. I struggled desperately in the prince’s arms. “No, that’s quite all right!”

Rene and his mother laughed, and then the little boy innocently asked, “What about the spell? The princess taught the boy a spell to break the magic on his mother. Can’t he use that same spell to help the princess?”

I gazed back into the prince’s twinkling blue eyes, and suddenly something snapped into place. The realization came so abruptly that I was left standing there with my eyes wide open, dumbfounded. “Spell...” I found myself staring at my reflection in his eyes as memories of that time, of that boy and the words we exchanged, came flooding back. “Back then...you promised you would teach me a spell the next time we met...” The image of the boy back then, his dazzling blond hair and vibrant blue eyes, lined up perfectly with the prince I saw before me.

The emotion in my eyes must have clued His Highness in to the fact that I’d remembered. “Eli...!” He beamed happily at me, and I found myself sharing in the joy as I smiled back.

“I remember now,” I said. Warm feelings swelled in my chest. Finally, I shared those memories too. We both grinned at each other, pressing our foreheads together.



After that, we left the rest to Lord Alan and the patrol, who arranged for Rene, his mother, and Paolo to be escorted to the medical facility. We promised we would visit in a few days to check in, then we took our leave and briefly returned to the Roma's residential area. There, we returned the books that Baron Maudsley had stolen via the Roma children.

Along the way, I broached the topic of my house's connection with the Roma, and His Highness explained, "Apparently it started with Fred's mischief nine years ago." He gave a bitter smile as he began to recount the astonishing tale he'd heard.

When my brother broke our father's rules and ventured to the Roma market nine years ago, he had been elated to see the mountain of books there. Just as I had done this time, he began buying up all the good tomes he could get his hands on. Unfortunately, since he was still a young boy, he barely had any coin on him. When the little he had dried up and he was at his wits end over how to come up with more, a rowdy bunch of boys approached and mischievously challenged him to a bet. Apparently dice gambling was popular among noblemen, though I knew very little about it myself. The common people also frequently engaged in it for sport.

The boys had teased my brother, saying, "If you win against us, we'll give you some money to buy your books. But if you lose, you have to strip off that expensive-looking clothing of yours and give it to us." The boys had singled him out, figuring him a noble by his appearance, but they had miscalculated. My brother displayed an unbelievable talent for gambling and beat them again and again until he'd relieved the boys of a substantial sum of money.

"My goodness," I said in astonishment, midway through the tale. I never knew my brother was possessed of such abilities.

The prince stifled his laughter and continued the story.

In the end, my brother even challenged the boss running the gambling house, and when he won, he instantly became famous among that rowdy Roma bunch. Ever since, the idea that you should "be especially careful if someone calling themselves a Bernstein appears" began to proliferate among the Roma. My father was likely privy to the truth of the situation, and that was why he even more strictly forbade us going.

I stood there flabbergasted, my jaw agape for what could have been the hundredth time that day (I'd lost count).

Lord Glen, who had accompanied the prince to hear this tale the first time from the Roma chief, swore, "Fred is the one man I will never, ever gamble with."

When we at last returned one of the books to the elderly Dr.

Rezzi, the conversation took yet another surprising turn. “Young lady, I thought I’d seen you somewhere before. You look just like this noble woman who came riding in to see us a couple decades back.”

“Pardon me?” I asked, blinking.

It all started twenty long years ago, he informed me, when a nobleman rode in and hit it off with the Stars of Thistle. The man had possessed such knowledge that he stood shoulder to shoulder with the group’s scholars. Immediately, they began comparing their knowledge, immersing themselves in passionate conversation about different treatises. They lost track of time in the process and a whole night went by.

The next morning, a pregnant woman rode in. Her face was sick with worry, since the man had stayed out without sending any word to her. When she found him, she gave him a painfully long lecture. The sight of this man, whose wealth of knowledge put him on equal footing with the best of them, being humbled by his wife became a legend among the Stars of Thistle.

Dr. Rezzi had a look of amusement on his face as he recalled the incident. “Never saw him since, so I wondered if that wife of his forbade him from ever comin’ back.”

Oh dear, I thought to myself. I had to force myself to keep my mouth shut since the old man’s description sounded exactly like someone I knew.

The prince had a devious smile on his face as he mumbled, “Now I can finally have my revenge on that tanuki.” I had no idea who or what he could be referring to, however.

At the end of the conversation, I saw my opportunity at last and asked Dr. Rezzi about one of the suspicions I had. “*The Star Traveler* is a story written by the Stars of Thistle, isn’t it?” I could feel the prince’s gaze on me as I stared back into the old man’s eyes. “Little Rene said it himself. ‘The Stars of Thistle are those who search tirelessly for the truth.’ The reason the content of the story changes by time period and country of origin is because the Stars of Thistle are noting down historical facts of that period, yes?” Facts, I suspected, that were seen as inconvenient to those wielding power at the time.

I stared into his eyes—eyes that shone with a wisdom that could not be dampened by alcohol—and they gazed back at me, as blindingly bright as a star in winter. It felt as though every part of me were being scrutinized. After a few moments, he gave a small snort. “You really are that man’s daughter, eh? Every person who ever has or ever will discover the truth of the Stars of Thistle always comes from the same family—*your* family.”

He glanced at the mountain of books and then up at the sky, speedily darkening as the sun set. “Long, long ago, my people defied

those in power and refused to take part in research on ways to kill people. We were almost all nearly wiped out as a result, and those that remained abandoned the country to survive instead as wanderers. Ever since, we Stars of Thistle have gone against authority in our constant mission to seek the truth.”

Dr. Rezzi turned his attention toward the prince standing beside me. “There was a family similar to our people, one that those in power in Sauslind hid away. Either because they wanted to protect that family...or because they didn’t want to let them go.

“Hey, boy,” he said, a sincere note to his voice. “Those in power hold wicked aspirations, and when they try to get their hands on more power than they can handle, it’s always the innocent civilians that are sacrificed. Ya may also harbor that dangerous potential for committing such folly in you. Just remember the Stars of Thistle are watchin’ to make sure this girl’s power doesn’t become so overwhelmin’ for ya that ya drown in it.”

His Highness’s vibrant blue eyes and reassuring smile colored sharply with emotion. “I will engrave that in my heart as the dying words of a drunk old man. Though I cannot deny that I’m drowning in love for Eli,” he said, once again planting a kiss atop my head.

As I panicked, fumbling for words, the old man hollered, “Who said those were my dyin’ words?!” His voice was loud enough it echoed throughout the entire residential area.

Our coach on the way home was overflowing with books, leaving no room for Annie, who had waited for us with the coachman the entire time. Granted, she hadn’t been able to ride with us on the way here either, since His Highness had insisted on it being just the two of us. Instead, she was riding on Lord Glen’s horse with him. At first she had been nervous, having little familiarity with riding, but she soon changed tunes when she learned her partner on the journey would be Lord Glen. The man was popular among the ladies.

As for myself, I was so excited and eager over which book I should start with first that I didn’t even notice His Highness watching with a bitter smile on his face. It only seemed appropriate today that I should start with *The Star Traveler* first, so I took the tome that Dr. Rezzi had given me in hand.

“Hey, Eli,” the prince said.

I glanced up as His Highness reached a hand out, brushing it over my curly hair.

“Why did you want to remember what happened so long ago?”

“Um... Well, you see, I just...really wanted to,” I answered nervously.

“Why?” he prompted gently, as if trying to ease my anxiety.

I turned my attention inward and began to express my feelings. “The reason I’m able to be at your side now is because of our past together. So I felt as though...I *needed* to remember.”

He gave a small, kind smile. “Ah, I see. I’m really happy you tried to remember. And, well, I guess I’ll be frank with you too... I was actually really anxious at first too.”

I blinked in surprise.

His own blue eyes clouded slightly as he recalled the past. “I am sure you already know this, but my mother was almost like a different person when her illness was cured. I understood that her situation forced her to become the way she had... But still, I was anxious. People change. I worried that no matter how I treasured our past memories or how strongly I felt for you, you would still change while we were apart.”

“Your Highness...”

The darkness in his eyes disappeared, and I now found myself reflected in them as he gazed straight back at me. “But nothing about you had changed. You’re the same ‘Bibliophile Princess’ that I remember. These past four years I watched you remain true to who you are while maturing at the same time, and it made me fall for you all over again.”

I could feel my cheeks immediately begin to heat up. The prince was trying to say that, while the meeting that sparked our relationship all those years ago was precious, he also wanted to remind me that the four years we’d spent as an engaged couple together were just as important.

I didn’t want to leave his feelings for me unanswered, so I stifled my embarrassment and stared back earnestly into his blue eyes. “I as well. In these four years, you have become even more irreplaceable to me than books.”

“Eli...” He smiled and caressed my cheek.

As I gazed back into the cloudless blue of his eyes, I found the boy that I had met so long ago. Those memories we shared together were almost like... “A treasure. It’s like I’ve found a treasure.” As he blinked in surprise, I asked him, “That day, you promised you would teach me a secret spell. Will you share it with me now?”

His smile broadened as he leaned closer, close enough for me to feel his breath against my skin, and he quietly whispered the spell. He grinned in satisfaction when he saw my face go red and placed a sweet, gentle kiss on my lips.

The gaps between the bookshelves were dark and poorly lit, almost like a labyrinth. The boy navigated the turns as if he were some kind of adventurer. Trapped deep within this forest of tomes was

a princess. The princess had fluffy hair and stood out brightly even against the darkness. No matter how the forest tried to cloak her from view, he could always find her.

Today was no different; he found the girl immediately and approached as she continued to read her book. Then he quietly whispered a spell to her, “You’re my treasure.”

Afterword

Hello there! My name is Yui. Thank you so much for reading this volume of *Bibliophile Princess*!

I have loved books ever since I was little. As long as I had one in hand, I would be well-behaved and quiet. The story of *Bibliophile Princess* was actually based on some popular keywords that appeared on the Syosetsu website (where the web novel is uploaded), but I have actually always loved reading and writing books. So in a way, it was kind of like a challenge to myself, like, “If I were an author, this is how I’d write things!”

Stories are strange things. I have all this creativity that has welled up within me coming to life in the form of this story, and it feels like every day I now have my characters shouting at me, “Let us out into the world! Let us out!” I find myself agonizing, caught between the story I imagine in my head and the reality that maybe my current writing abilities aren’t good enough for me to be able to express it properly. The reason I continue to write despite all of that is probably because I am captivated by the appeal of being an author.

So that was how *Bibliophile Princess* was born. And it’s not quite living up to the purely romantic series I’d intended. I mean, that *was* the direction I was supposed to be going for, but the comedic parts I had planned in the beginning somehow took over. Combined with the protagonist’s airheaded nature, the story kind of veered off track by the end.

Even during the part about Chris’s youth, it was a real struggle with myself trying desperately to make sure the story didn’t turn comical. There was this fierce battle between the comedian in my veins (note: I don’t actually descend from any comedians) and my vision of Chris as someone who would defend his image as a suave, collected prince to the death. In fact, while he gives us glimpses at his scheming ways, he won’t really allow us to see his true self. It felt like a battle with him constantly trying to resist my attempts to portray him candidly. (He should be happy that I didn’t name the new content arc “The Prince’s Day of Heaven and Hell.”)

As for our key protagonist, Eli, she’s also a stubborn type that completely ignores anything not relevant to her interests. When those around her try to provoke her interest in romance, she gives them the slip. She even indirectly rebuffs Chris’s attempts to try to court her

and isn't really the type to stick her nose into things. All she does is read books all the time.

It really makes you feel like, "What the heck is with this protagonist?" It may sound strange for me to say given that I am the author, but she just really doesn't *move* at all. Yet it feels like everyone else around her is desperately rushing. As I was coming up with the plot for the extra content for this volume, my editor even said, "I can't think of her doing anything other than reading books..." Plus she's not the type to just let herself be kidnapped either, but rather the kind to impatiently march right in and try to solve things. As we saw, Eli is the type to ride in to save the princess (or books in this case) from the bad guys. I wish you luck, Chris. (Actually as we were doing the planning for the extra content, my editor suggested the title "Good Luck, Chris.")

After receiving the opportunity to publish *Bibliophile Princess*, I made many extensive improvements and adjustments to the manuscript in anticipation of its light novel debut. That meant going back through a story that was, in my mind, already complete and having to dig through it and re-put it together all over again. This turned out to be a far more confusing ordeal than I thought it would be. I gradually fell into this baffled state where I wasn't sure what was good or bad anymore. Each time that happened, my editor kindly reassured me and told me exactly what I needed to hear, and somehow I was able to finish everything. I am truly grateful.

I know this sounds cliché, but I really do want to thank everyone who helped me. To the proofreader who was surely confused at my choppy and confusing word choice in places, thank you for your gentle guidance each time. It was always so helpful. I'd also like to thank the designer who did an adorable job with the title design, everyone at Ichijinsha (the publishing company) who gave me this opportunity, the staff running the Syosetsu website, and finally Satsuki Sheena for her drawings that made me squee each time I saw them. Her drawings were like the bait that lured me into completing this volume. Almost like a carrot being hung in front of a horse, teasing it like, "Hungry? Want this?" I'm such a slowpoke, but her art really spurred me on to see this volume through to the end.

I would also like to thank all of my friends and family for supporting me and listening to my (frequent) crying and complaining when I was plagued with writer's block. Though more than anyone else, thank you to all of you, my readers. This world is overflowing with stories and books, so I thank you from the bottom of my heart for choosing to read mine out of all of them. I hope that my story was able to leave a lasting impression on you, however small.

I'm still very inexperienced, but I will continue to improve my

craft so that hopefully I can deliver an enjoyable, emotionally impactful reading experience to all of you. I look forward to meeting you all again in my other books!

-Yui



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Bibliophile Princess: Volume 1
by Yui

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